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THE HONOURABLE JANE

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BY

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"A PASSION IN TATTERS," "THE LOVE OF A LADY," "HE COMETH
NOT, SHE SAID," "LE BEAU SABREUR," "THE ROLL OF
HONOUR," "THAT OTHER WOMAN," ETC.



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THE HONOURABLE JANE.

CHAPTER I.

THE NEWS COMES.

THERE is an unwonted stir one morning in June in the ordinarily quiet, not to say stagnant, household of Major the Honourable John Herries. Jane, the youngest daughter of the house, opens her slumber-laden eyes and blinks them with a mixture of alarm and bewilderment at the dazzling sunbeams which are streaming in at her uncurtained window, as after a sound as of a mighty and rushing wind a young lady rushes into the room, her white cashmere tea-gown streaming several yards behind her, with the words,—

“Grandpapa is dead ! Get up, you lazy little pig, and come and congratulate papa on being Lord Roydmore !”

In response to this adjuration, Jane slips out of bed and into a threadbare, red flannel dressing-gown, from the hem of which her shapely, slim young legs protrude for many inches. It is the first time within her memory that death has entered the family realms, and she is astonished and a little disgusted with herself for not feeling shocked at the intelligence. She feels that she is called upon to say something, and looks at her excited sister for an inspiration. Some-

thing in that sister's pretty, frankly expressive face distracts her mind from the sorrowful part of the subject, and leads her to say,—

“You look quite cross about it, Flo!”

“Cross!” says Florence, with an unmistakably ill-tempered stamp of a prettily-slippered foot. “Cross! You little noodle, you don't expect me to look pleased and grateful for the good luck having come just too late for me to share in it. What should I be but ‘cross’ at the idea of having been thrown away all these years in Bath, and deluded at the last into such a marriage as I am going to make to-morrow, in despair of getting anything better. Don't grin at me.”

“I *wasn't* grinning. I wouldn't be so heartless, with grandpapa just dead, and you just going to be married!” Jane says indignantly.

“Well, don't gape at me, then. Oh! you *lucky* girl! To think that *you* will come in for it all! *You*, who haven't an idea of making the best of such looks as you have, while I shall be buried alive and half-boiled in a hole among the Somersetshire hills. Why, oh, *why* didn't grandpapa die six months ago, before I promised to marry Geoffrey Graves? It will make me sick when I see your name, ‘The Honourable Jane Herries,’ at all sorts of fashionable functions that I've never been given the chance of attending. You'll be presented, too! I feel it. It's a shame that all this good should fall to your lot, and that I should have had none of it—I, the eldest daughter, and ever so much the prettiest.”

She pauses, panting in her indignant agitation at the thought of the desperate injustice with which fate has treated her, and Jane strives to offer a modicum of comfort.

“You *are* the prettiest, that's something, you know. And you've always liked Geoffrey's place so much, and he will let you do as you like; and he's rich, quite as rich as papa will be, I should think.”

“Please don't talk about things you don't under-

stand," Florence replies haughtily. "I liked his place when I had nothing before me but the prospect of stewing on in Bath for an unlimited number of years. As for his being rich, he seemed so to me yesterday, when I was only the daughter of a poor, half pay Major. But *now* I am the Honourable Florence Herries, eldest daughter of Lord Roydmore ; and when I think of how well *I* should have faced the position *you will* have when you come out, I could throw this brush at your head. *Are* you going to condole with and congratulate papa ?"

Jane would give every small possession she has in the world to avoid this ceremony, but her sister's sway over her is absolute.

"I hardly know what to say to papa about it. You see grandpapa was always so cross to us all. I wonder if he will scold much in Heaven?"

Florence laughs pettishly.

"Amiability is certainly not the rock on which we Herries split," she says contemptuously. "When papa sent for me to tell me the news just now, he sent a regular royal salute of strong language into the air at the idea of my wedding-breakfast being wasted. It's too late to countermand it, you see, and still we must put off all the guests. I offered to put off the wedding, but papa jumped at me, and said he 'would have no nonsense of that kind.' I never in all my life saw a girl do her hair as hideously as you do, Jane. Oh, dear, if I had been going to stay at home I should have got papa to send you to a school in Brussels to polish off your angles and have your hair combed into becomingness. You never can be grateful enough to me for marrying and getting out of your way, now your way is going to be pleasant. You never can do enough for me in return. Why, if I had stayed at home I shouldn't have let you come out till you were twenty, and now papa says he shall put you at the head of the London house at once. Ridiculous ! and you only seventeen !"

While her sister has been talking, Jane has made

her toilette as best she can under the circumstances of the severity which characterises all the arrangements of her apartment. Her looking-glass has a flaw in it which makes one side of her face look puffy, while the other looks pallid and wizened. Moreover, the regulating screw has vanished, and the glass has to be propped into position by a book, or a brush, or a boot, or any other article that comes handy. If her face got a fair reflection of itself, Jane would not go down to breakfast each day with the lowly opinion she now holds of her own personal appearance.

"Is papa busy—or has he anything to do?" she asks hesitatingly, as she accompanies her sister downstairs to their father's study,—a room in which he breakfasts, but never reads. Newspapers are the only literature that interest him, and these he sees at the pump-room every day when he goes to drink that glass of nasty water which it is supposed has regulated his liver for the last ten years.

"He really will have something to do—he is going up to London at once, so he won't be a bit 'busy' this morning," Florence says reassuringly. Then, together, the sisters step into their father's presence, and poor Jane flounders into error at once by greeting him as "Lord Roydmore."

"I'm not that until after the funeral," he says testily, pushing away his plate, on which an untasted omelette, steaming forth its savoury odours, has just been placed before him. "Florence, why don't you see that your sister has decent morning dresses? If there's one thing I hate on a woman more than another, it's a cotton dress—a starched cotton dress that crackles!"

He pauses, draws the hot-water plate with the omelette upon it before him again, and glances peevishly from one to the other of his daughters as he begins his repast.

Florence has thrown herself negligently but very gracefully into the easiest chair in his room. Jane is standing, shifting her weight awkwardly from one

foot to the other. They have been both kept in awe by their father's fretfulness and habit of fault-finding from their cradles, but Florence is going to be emancipated to-morrow, and fears him no longer.

"I thought you didn't care what Jane wore; you always told me to make the best of myself, and dress Jane cheaply till she was marriageable—and she certainly isn't that yet," Miss Herries explains.

The new Lord Roydmore looks at his eldest daughter dubiously, tastes the omelette, finds it delicious, and carefully conceals all expression of satisfaction thereat; indicates by a quick motion of his head to Jane that he is ready for his coffee, and as she sugars and creams it to the requisite point of richness, says,—

"Jane is a different matter now. She will join me in town directly after the funeral and I shall expect to see her decently dressed. You must go and order all that she wants to-day——"

"Papa! I have so much to do for myself. My things are not half packed, and as I *am* to be married to-morrow, I must think of myself first."

"You've been thinking of yourself 'first' all your life," he shouts; "to my certain knowledge and cost, you have been ordering and packing your wedding outfit for the last three months. The bills that have come in from Millsom Street would have turned my hair grey if I hadn't fortunately come into—I mean, if Providence had not thought fit to remove your grandfather. Have you thought of your sister once while you've been gratifying your own extravagant tastes, or has all the money gone to adorn yourself."

Florence's grey eyes flash ominously. Her father's habit of scolding about trifles has never been so irksome to her as it is to-day, when she is on the brink of freedom. Detestable as the prospect of her marriage has suddenly become to her, she contemplates it with a sense of relief now, as his jarring tones fall upon her ears in unreasonable fault-finding.

"If I am selfish, I am not silly enough to show it to all the world, papa. I have taken care that Jane shall have a lovely costume to wear at my wedding. I went without a tea-gown—a lovely, pale, sea-green plush tea-gown, trimmed with lace that looks like foam—in order to get Jane a pretty costume. And now you call me selfish!"

Jane's colour had been rising, and her violet eyes have become full nearly to overflowing during this altercation between her father and sister.

"I am not worth all this trouble that you are taking about me, now when you are both so busy and have so many more important things to think of. Don't scold Flo, papa; poor dear, it's bad enough that she'll have no breakfast, and such a little quiet wedding——"

"You're a little fool, but a good-hearted one," her father interrupts, looking at her curiously; and Florence gives her head an impatient toss as she puts in,—

"It is easy to be 'good-hearted' when you are going to have everything that heart can desire. Oh! I hear Geoffrey; why on earth couldn't he have left us in peace for to-day?"

The next moment the study door is thrown open with violence, and an utter disregard of the state of the new Lord Roydmore's nerves, and a tall, well-grown, fair, clean-shaven young man of seven or eight and twenty comes breezily into the room. He tries to look distressed as he takes his future father-in-law's proffered hand, but his eyes gleam with joy as they light on Florence.

"You won't let this—this sad event put off our marriage for a time, will you, sir?" he asks, anxiously; and as he hears the answer "Most certainly not," he turns, takes the unwilling Florence in his arms, and kisses her rapturously.

"It was never going to be anything very grand, but it will be a hole-and-corner sort of wedding now," Florence grumbles, but her lover is too much en-

chanted at the prospect of getting her at once to be depressed by her lack of enthusiasm.

"My darling," he murmurs, "what does it matter how it is done, so long as you are made mine, my very own, at once?"

CHAPTER II.

THE HONEYMOON.

WHEN Lord Roydmore returned from town after making all needful preparations for his father's funeral, on the night before Florence's wedding, he called his two daughters to him, and distributed between them a fair quantity of valuable jewellery that had belonged to his mother.

"The Roydmore diamonds and the rest of the family jewels will, of course, descend in due course of time to your brother for his wife, if he ever has one. But these were your grandmother's private ornaments, and I will divide them between you as justly as I can," he explained, with more feeling than he usually displayed. Upon which Florence had hung round his neck fondly, and whispered an entreaty that she, "as the eldest, might have first choice."

"No, no, nothing of the sort," he said sharply; "I have done them up in parcels of equal value. Without seeing the contents of these parcels, you shall draw for them."

"Jane is very young to wear handsome jewellery," Florence remarked disapprovingly; "besides, she is sure to come in for a lot more when mamma's aunt dies."

"Flo is quite welcome to my share, papa," Jane interposed. "I can't fancy myself in necklaces and bracelets and rings."

"You'll 'fancy' yourself in them fast enough,"

Florence said petulantly ; “and please don’t be so ultra-humble and generous, Jane ; it won’t do me any good.”

“Now draw, draw lots and get this over,” their father put in with the well-known Herries frown and asperity. Whereupon they obeyed him without delay, with the result that Florence became the possessor of a ruby necklet with a diamond pendant, while to Jane’s lot there fell an exquisite necklace of perfectly matched pearls.

With a brief “Thank you, papa,” Florence turned to leave the room, but paused at the door to say,—

“Before you wear your pearls, you had better protect your neck from the sun for a summer or two.”

“Let her have them, papa,” Jane begged, as soon as the door had closed behind her sister, but he checked her, and closed the subject by saying,—

“I ought to have crushed the cursed selfishness out of her before this. It will be her ruin if Geoffrey is not firm. Now leave me, my child. I must write to your brother. You are growing very like your mother, Jane ; and those pearls were always meant for her by my mother. I am glad they are yours.”

“Thank you, papa.”

The words were precisely the same as those spoken by Florence, but there was a world more meaning in them. Jane’s voice trembled with affectionate gratitude—because her father had spoken to her in accents of unprecedented kindness, not because he had given her a valuable pearl necklace. The girl had been so repressed by him during the long years of his embittering strife with poverty and his futile efforts to keep up a position that was always in danger of being buried beneath bankruptcy, that she had always striven to efface herself. Florence, on the other hand, had always brought herself well to the fore, and had invariably given her father to understand that he owed her a great deal for having brought her into such an extremely uncongenial

position in the world. Accordingly, Jane had got all the kicks, and Florence all the ha'pence (they had been very few), with this result, that now, when he was able to do something tangibly good for his daughters, Jane was grateful for the goodness, while Florence took it merely as her due.

The day of the Honourable Florence's marriage was a weariness and disappointment to her from beginning to end. There had never been much of a function contemplated—the finances of the half-pay Major would not have stood the strain. Still, she had looked forward to wearing a rich white satin Duchesse dress, trimmed with real old point, the gift of Geoffrey's mother, before the envious eyes of many of her dear Bath girl friends, who had hitherto cut her down in the matter of costumes. She had also looked forward to seeing several disappointed mammas and daughters, who had more or less artlessly tried to secure Geoffrey Graves for themselves, at the wedding breakfast. But now she was shorn of these joys through her grandfather's death. There was no bridal dress, there were no wedding guests or wedding breakfast, and it seemed to the few who witnessed the ceremony that the bridegroom's expression of triumphant happiness was singularly out of place on the face of a man who stood at the altar with such a discontented-looking bride.

"I had ten times rather be going up to town with papa and you, and seeing about getting the town house in order," the newly-made Mrs. Graves said, as they lingered for a few minutes in the bedroom of the latter, waiting for the carriage that was to take them on the first stage of their honeymoon journey.

"There is a country house too? Papa won't always stay in London, will he?" Jane asked anxiously.

"Of course there's a country house. You've heard of Roydmore often enough, haven't you? But papa doesn't like Roydmore. Now, take my advice, Jane; when you begin to entertain, have plenty of *awfully*

attractive young married women about. Cultivate *them*, and keep clear of widows and girls, or one of them will marry papa, and then where will you be?"

"Marry! Papa marry again! Absurd."

"Not at all. Now he's Lord Roydmore, *hundreds* of girls would rather marry him than—than Geoffrey, for instance," Geoffrey's bride added with a laugh.

Jane was conscious of receiving a shock both to her heart and delicacy as her sister said this. But whether it was at the possibility of her father's marrying again, or at the lack of anything like loving pride in the newly-made wife's mention of her husband, the girl could not determine for the moment. Then there came hurried leave-takings, a hearty kiss from her new brother-in-law, and the married pair were whirled away, leaving Jane feeling very bewildered and lonely at the loss of the lovely sister who had always tyrannised over her.

The house in which the Herries had lived in Bath for the last sixteen years had grown woefully shabby in the course of their occupation. The houses even of the best-intentioned people are apt to do this when their current needs absorb the whole of their incomes. The tables and chairs had grown ricketty, and had never been either mended or replaced. The carpets had gone threadbare in some rooms, and completely worn themselves off the floors in others. The wall-papers had faded and become damp-stained. Neglect, the frequent offspring of poverty, had set its unattractive seal on every nook and corner of the house. Still, to Jane every nook and corner was dear, partly from association, and partly because she had never known any other home.

To Florence, every nook and corner had been hateful, and so some months ago she had gladly hailed the prospect of getting away from them to become the mistress of one of the most picturesque and best-kept places in Somersetshire, "The Court," Geoffrey Graves' very delightful, very aristocratic, but perhaps rather dull and secluded old home.

She had hailed the prospect gladly, but not with any profession of love or gratitude to the man who had opened it up to her. With an amount of frankness that to a less infatuated lover than Geoffrey Graves would have been painful, she had permitted him to see that she took him merely as an appendage to his place, and that, could she have detached him from The Court and retained the latter, she would have done so delightedly. However, he had resolutely shut his eyes to her unflattering method of treating him, and had pursued his wooing with as much—perhaps with more—zeal and energy than is ordinarily displayed even by warmly encouraged lovers.

To his mother, who had herself been an affectionately adoring as well as a dutiful wife, and to his sisters, who were good, plain, and the reverse of fascinating, Florence and her insolently exercised witcheries had been hateful from the first. With more blunt honesty than tact or discretion, they had pointed out to him her vanity, her selfishness, the greed with which she always monopolised the loaves and fishes, leaving little or nothing for her younger sister, and her utter unsuitability in every way to be the wife of a country gentleman whose income required prudent, thrifty handling if the traditional state of The Court was to be maintained. Geoffrey thought her beauty justified the vanity, and as for the selfishness, greed and thriftlessness, they were qualities which he distinctly refused to admit she possessed. His love for her was beautiful in its strength, trust and intensity. There were moments when her coldness made his heart feel chilled, but they were brief, for he was always prompt with the explanation to himself, that this was only the sweet modesty and reserve of a pure, high-bred English girl, and that she would well requite him for it when she became his wife. His awakening from this beautifully-delusive dream was not a long-drawn-out process by any means. His wife showed him a taste

of her quality on their wedding-day, when he made his first suggestion to her as her husband. It had been arranged that the young couple should spend a fortnight in Scotland, and then give themselves a week in London before they came back to settle for good at The Court. But this programme no longer suited the lady, who in the interim had become Lord Roydmore's daughter.

"I don't mean to go to Scotland, Geoffrey," she said decidedly, when he spoke about taking tickets to go north by the night mail; "and I won't put my foot in London until papa has a house fit to receive me in, and the days of mourning for grandpapa are over. We'll go to Paris."

"But, my darling, we sha'n't enjoy ourselves, or have half as much fun there as in London. I know London so well, and in Paris I shall be all at sea."

He was not strong in any language but his own mother tongue, this fine young English gentleman, who had been to a public school, and to Oxford; and he knew that humiliation would be his portion, to say nothing of intense weariness, if Florence persisted in dragging him to Paris, and took him to theatres where he would not understand a word the actors were saying. But Florence was not to be turned from her new scheme.

"Oh, you'll enjoy yourself very well, Geoffrey; we'll go to races and things of that sort on Sundays, and brush off our insular cobwebs. Don't be alarmed; I'll do all the order-giving and talking. To Paris we'll go; I've made up my mind to it."

He offered but faint opposition after this, for above all things he desired to please her, and to keep the frowns away from her lovely face. But all the time he was vaguely conscious that he was a fool for surrendering his plans so readily to her caprices, and the idea of Paris was obnoxious to him.

Not more obnoxious than the reality. He knew no one, and was perfectly ignorant of what were the right things to do, and where were the right places

to go. Florence enjoyed the shops, and the theatres, and the open-air gaieties like a child ; but young Mr. Graves sustained the reputation his countrymen have gained, and took his pleasures very sadly.

It was like finding water in a dry land to him when one day he met an old schoolfellow, now a dashing and distinguished infantry man. This Captain Stafford had been a hero in Geoffrey's eyes in the old school days, on account of his skill and prowess in all kinds of athletic and field sports. He was more of a hero than ever now to the simple country gentleman, who had never seen a shot fired in anger in his life—for Harry Stafford had seen some smart service lately, had distinguished himself for personal gallantry, and wore the grandest recognition of that gallantry which an Englishman can gain—the V. C.

Beyond this, Captain Stafford was a brilliant and accomplished gentleman, who knew his Paris well, and who, consequently, made life there a very different thing to what it had been before his advent to the two benighted people who had been merely groping about before he came. He was "good to be seen with," also. Every one who knew him was proud, in these days, to be recognised by gallant, dashing, handsome Harry Stafford. Accordingly, Florence decreed, and Geoffrey assented, not at all unwillingly, that they should spend yet another fortnight in the City of Pleasure. Captain Stafford was the perfection of a guide, and Geoffrey knew him to be one of the best and most honourable fellows in the world. Nevertheless, he did sometimes experience some outsider sensations when his wife and Captain Stafford were laughing heartily at some delicate pleasantry in a play, which to Mr. Graves was a mere jumble of unintelligible gibberish.

"He is the handsomest and finest, as well as the most fascinating fellow I ever saw or dreamt of," Mrs. Graves admitted to herself, when the day of parting came, and she was shaking hands with him for the last time. "Now, if Geoffrey were like him, I

shouldn't so much mind going back to The Court."

She sighed petulantly as she thought this, and the sound made Captain Stafford look up suddenly and meet her eyes. Whatever he read there it displeased him apparently, for he turned from her rather haughtily and coldly, and directed all his attention, during the last moments of their being together, to Geoffrey.

"Come and see us in September," the latter was saying heartily. "I've never gone in for breeding pheasants, as I told you, but the place swarms with birds."

"And by the time you come I will have learnt the guitar, and then we can have some duets," Mrs. Graves put in as an extra inducement; and there came a very curious look in her eyes, a sort of danger-signal, when he made answer coolly,—

"Thank you, Mrs. Graves, but I'm boor enough to devote myself entirely to my gun in September. I only fool with the guitar when I can get neither shooting nor hunting."

"You shall always do quite as you please at The Court," she said smilingly. "I mean to make it a perfect Liberty Hall to those guests of whom I approve."

"And a perfect Hell to those whom you don't like, including your husband," Captain Stafford thought, as he turned away from the beautiful woman, to whom he had taken one of those instinctive dislikes which no amount of flattering courtesy from the disliked one can abolish.

"She's not half good enough for poor old Geof," the fine, keen-sighted soldier thought angrily. "And he thinks her an angel, and has tears in his eyes when he speaks of her sweet goodness in marrying him. She'll play the devil with him in some way, but I don't think it will be by intrigue; she's too selfish to risk anything for any human being. But he'll have to repent having won his angel in some way or other, if I am not very much mistaken."

Meantime, Geoffrey was assuring Florence that, happy as he had been in the companionship of his old friend, it was an absolute relief to see the last of him. "For now I shall have you to myself again, my own," he said ardently.

"Only till we get to The Court, Geof," she replied coolly. "I am not going to live like a nun, simply because grandpapa died six weeks ago."

"It won't be a very conventual kind of existence, considering you will have your husband with you, dear."

"Oh! you don't count," she said brusquely. "We should rust, and rasp each other horribly if we lived the Darby and Joan life. The best authorities on the subject declare that monotony is the bane of married life, and I believe them!"

"I could never feel it monotonous while I had you, Flo."

"Then you must be a very dull and plodding-minded person, Geof, and the sooner you grow less stolid the better. Now, I love change and excitement, and I'm honest enough to admit it. I shall like The Court well enough while it's all new to me, but as soon as it begins to pall upon me, I shall go up to town and stay with papa."

"You can't be always running away from your own home," he said, more sternly than his wife had ever heard him speak before. But that fearless young lady was by no means crushed by his displeasure.

"We'll argue the matter out when I want to run away," she laughed; "but I can assure you I am not going to let Jane reap all the advantages which are gained by papa's coming to the title and property."

"Poor Jane! she hasn't had a very lively existence hitherto," Geoffrey said, smiling as he recalled the way in which Jane had been wont to scuffle out of the way of smart visitors into the shade, in order that the shabbiness of her skimpy little frocks might not bring discredit upon the Herries' household.

“Why do you say ‘poor’ Jane?” his wife interrogated sharply; “it was rather ‘poor me,’ I think, in those horrible old Bath days. I have a natural love of beauty, and order, and refinement. Jane, would just as soon wear hideous things as not, and I can tell you her room was like a rag shop unless I stood over her and made her tidy it up. ‘Poor Jane.’ indeed! Why, she’s one of the luckiest girls in London, and if she only makes the best of herself, she ought to make a capital marriage. Now I am cut out of all that, yet you don’t pity me!”

“It was not possible that Flo could be serious in saying this,” Geoffrey Graves told himself as he stared at her in a piteously pleading dismay. He said nothing, but he put out his hand and took hers, and Florence snatched it away angrily, declaring that he was pressing the big diamond ring (one he had given her on the auspicious occasion of their betrothal) into her finger. She must be over-fatigued with the reaction after her late gaieties, and bored by the travelling, the good-hearted fellow assured himself. Still, he felt vaguely hurt and disappointed that she could rebuff him so.

CHAPTER III.

TWELVE MONTHS AFTER.

DURING the year which had passed since the Honourable Jane Herries had packed up her scanty wardrobe, and reluctantly bidden adieu to the shabby home where she had never been remarkably happy nor free, nor treated with the slightest amount of consideration, much had occurred which it might reasonably have been anticipated would have altered her greatly. Altered she was externally, without doubt. The beauty, that had not been very apparent in the old Bath days, when she wore the badly-fitting dresses,

that were either her more capable sister's "cast-off's," or the work of some fifth-rate dressmaker, was done justice to now by some of the best-built gowns and habits in town. The warm chestnut hair, with a decided kink—not a curl—in it, which of yore she had worn generally in a tangle, was arranged, in these halcyon days, by the deft hands of an artistic maid, in a way that brought out all the subtle charm of Jane's mobile, irregular-featured young face. Her eyes had always been beautiful. No amount of shabbiness and untidiness had marred the loveliness of those starry, violet eyes that were encircled so becomingly by thick, long, dark lashes. But even her eyes had gained a new expression in the course of the last twelve months. They were sweeter, but less shy. They flashed and sparkled less, perhaps, but their depths held greater pathos. In fact, their owner had learnt to feel more widely, keenly, and strongly about certain things. And through those windows of the soul, her eyes, many of her feelings could be discerned.

But in simplicity of manner and singleness of heart, in straightforwardness and unselfishness, she was still the Jane of the old Bath days, who had volunteered to give up her richest possession—the pearl necklace—to her imperiously exacting sister.

The days of mourning for the old gentleman whose death had rejoiced and enriched them all were over now, and Lord Roydmore and his only unmarried daughter had just been launched upon the fiercely rolling tide of the London season. It was just the commencement of June, and Jane was looking forward, with a mixture of palpitating eagerness and gruesome nervousness, to the next drawing-room, at which she was to be presented. Hitherto her going out had been of the soberest and quietest. A little family dinner now and again at her great-aunt's, old Mrs. Bathurst's, a few evenings with her father at the opera and theatres, some dull musical at-homes, and frequent little luncheon parties at the house of a friend

of her father's, had been all she had seen of the great world as yet. But after the next drawing-room, she was to have as full flavoured a taste of it as the heart of any girl could desire.

She had signally failed in carrying out her sister's orders to keep young girls and widows at bay, and cultivate young married women alone. The young married women had not seemed to care for her, whereas a few girls had sought her as ardently and perseveringly as though she were the last straw at which their brothers, drowning in a sea of impecuniosity, could clutch. And one widow had enfolded her in such a close social embrace that, struggle as she would, she found it impossible to free herself from it.

The intimacy between them had sprung up so suddenly, and been cemented with such celerity, that Jane's brain grew bewildered when she tried to explain and describe it. Her father, who had always been either testily critical or contemptuously indifferent about her in Bath, where she was completely over-shadowed by Florence, had grown kind and considerate to her as soon as—by Florence's marriage—she (Jane) had become of importance in the household as the mistress of it. Then a little later on, Jane's developing beauty, heightened by well and fashionably made dresses, gratified his fatherly pride to such an extent that he came out of the slough of ill-temper and selfish discontent in which he had wallowed for so many years, and strove to the utmost of his ability to make life a more agreeable thing to his young daughter.

This was all in the early days of their bereavement, before he could give Jane those society joys and diversions in which he intended she should be freely indulged by-and-by. Their life was a quiet one, but very pleasant, Jane thought. For her father was never either testily critical or contemptuously indifferent now. He seemed to have grown ten years younger since the burden of the constantly recurring urgent need of money had been lifted from his shoul-

ders. From being a rather stooping and sorrowful-looking man of fifty, he had resumed the fine, upright, soldierly bearing and physique of a man over whose well-carried head only two score years had rolled. Jane felt as proud of her rejuvenated papa as he was of his exquisitely developing daughter, and the pair gave themselves a happy time together—without too much of Florence.

For it was a fact that, as soon as her natural grief at parting with the only companion she had ever had was over, Jane felt what she had first considered to be sinfully well-pleased at Florence's departure. She had always been tongue-tied, awkward, and abashed before her masterful sister, and dimly she recognised now that Florence had always stood as a sort of disparagingly middle-man—or woman—between their father and Jane herself. At the same time, though she was conscious of a sense of general relief and greater importance now that she was the sole daughter of Lord Roydmore's heart and home, she felt as lovingly and loyally as ever towards her sister, and longed for the time to come when Florence should come up to town and partake of the goods the gods were now giving to the head of the house of Herries freely.

Up to this period, young Mrs. Graves had been defrauded of what she considered a just portion of her natural and legitimate rights. She had proffered herself as a guest in her father's house repeatedly, and each time she had been "put off" very firmly and distinctly by Lord Roydmore himself. Once or twice she had presented herself unexpectedly, and tried to slide into position as the always welcome eldest daughter. But somehow or other she had never gained a footing in the establishment, though Jane had been altogether on her side. Lord Roydmore had suffered her suavely for a day or two, but that was all. At the end of a day she had been compelled, by some unseen and unrecognised force, to retire to her Somersetshire fastness, and her wrath at this changed state of things was a sight to see.

But now suddenly the whole aspect of affairs was altered, and Lord Roydmore made Jane's heart glad by telling her that she "might have her sister and Geoffrey Graves up to stay with her for three weeks."

"I'll give you a ball while Flo is here, and we will have half-a-dozen dinner parties for them. But make Flo understand that I will have no nonsense! If she comes here and has her fling, her husband must come with her," Lord Roydmore said impressively to his youngest daughter.

"Of course she wouldn't come without Geof, and there never has been any nonsense about Flo, papa. She was always full of common sense and practicality, and I don't suppose she has lost these qualities since her marriage."

Jane threw up her head like a young war-horse, and almost stamped defiantly at her father as she spoke.

"I can't combat your suppositions, my dear, but I know this: I hear many things about Florence that I don't quite like, and if she wants to come without her husband I won't have her. By the way, you may as well let her understand that she owes this invitation to that dear good creature Mrs. Collette."

Lord Roydmore was slipping out of the room as he spoke, perhaps to save Jane the trouble of answering him. But she was too earnest and too eager for him. She sprung at him and flung her arm round his shoulder.

"Papa, Mrs. Collette may be a dear good creature, but she must not pretend to dictate to you about your children. If I told Flo what you said, I was 'to give her to understand,' she would probably order Mrs. Collette out of the house, and order me never to speak to Mrs. Collette again."

Lord Roydmore put his daughter's arm away from him, and his daughter's appeal aside, with the words, severely spoken,—

"You must learn to be less impulsive, and Flor-

ence must learn to be less imperious, if either of you wish to continue to get on as well as hitherto with me. Up to this time I have had no fault to find with you, Jane. Your head has not been turned by the luxuries with which I have surrounded you, and the pleasures in which I have allowed you to participate freely ; but if all I hear is true, I have cause for serious annoyance, more than annoyance—displeasure—with Florence.”

“After all, papa, I was born to the position ; if I had been an upstart, my head might have been turned, but I am your own daughter, and the position is my right. As for Flo, if Geoffrey has no cause for annoyance or displeasure with her, *you* can have none ; and as for Mrs. Collette, if she comes between us, papa, I shall hate her, and let her know it.”

It was the first time the Honourable Jane Herries had thought fit to assert herself, but her father recognised, as she stood before him, facing him steadily, her handsome young head held up as haughtily as if she were a queen defending the rights of her crown, and her words ringing out fearlessly, that this child of his, whom he had always found to be so yielding and obedient, had a will of her own, and a temper of her own too.

“Well, well, we will say no more about it,” he said hurriedly. “Nothing will ever come between me and my children. As for Mrs. Collette, you mustn’t make the mistake of thinking she has been interfering, she is incapable of doing anything officious. She merely suggested that if the rumours about Florence were true—I mean that as there are rumours about her, it would be just as well that I should have her here, and show the world that I countenanced her. It was done in pure kindness, pure kindness, you see.”

Jane laughed.

“It’s rather funny to hear of a middle-class woman like Mrs. Collette teaching you your duty to your daughter. Don’t look angry, papa ; she is

middle-class, or she wouldn't be so anxious when I'm with her to let people know that I am 'Lord Roydmore's daughter.'" Then she held up her face to be kissed, and added, "Thank you very much for promising me the ball."

"It will be a good opportunity for you to wear your pearls. Mrs. Collette says she hopes you will keep entirely to white in this your first season." Lord Roydmore spoke deprecatingly. Mrs. Collette's name had rolled off his tongue before he had calculated the consequences of mentioning her again, but Jane was merciful indifferent to that lady's interference on her (Jane's) own account. It was only when Mrs. Collette put out a guiding or protecting hand towards Florence that she risked getting a rap over the knuckles from Jane.

"I'll wear my pearls, and I'll dress in white; I'll do anything in the world to please you, papa; and now I'll write to Flo, and tell her what a good time you are going to give us," she said heartily, with such a display of confidence in her father having no stronger interest in life than his children, that his heart smote him a little as he presently wended his way across the park to call on Mrs. Collette.

His step grew jauntier as he approached her house. He drew himself up still more erectly, and at a florist's in Queen Street he stopped for a minute to select a Malmaison carnation for his button-hole, and a huge artistically careless arrangement of the same flowers for the lady to whom he was about to pay his respects. Ten minutes afterwards he was entering her presence, and her "presence" merits a full description.

What her age might have been at this period it was impossible to say. She had no children to date her. She was so admirably corsetted that her figure, especially her back, looked quite young. She had a light, springy step, and an elastic way of swaying her tall, lithe form about that was suggestive of the irrepressible activity and energy of youth. Her dark brown hair had not one single silver thread in it; that is to

say, there were no silver threads in it when it was prepared for the eyes and observation of man. But if you looked closely at her by daylight, when she was unprotected by the tone of colour which the rose-silk curtains and draperies of her drawing-room threw around her as a shield, you saw that there were lines on her temples, and under her pretty grey hazel eyes, that only time can paint in. There was also a slight tendency to fulness under her chin, and when her mouth was in repose, and she was alone, there was a hard compression, a flattening of the lips, that told its own tale of a weary struggle with the world of many years' standing. Nevertheless, in spite of the few slight indications of age, Mrs. Collette was a remarkably handsome woman, and so Lord Roydmore thought her.

CHAPTER IV.

TWO OLD LOVERS.

THE Malmaison carnations had been presented, accepted with gracious gratitude, and were lying in the lap of the lady whose ripe beauty accorded well with that of the flowers. She sat in a low chair with her back to the window, through whose rose-tinted curtains streamed a warm, western light. By her side sat Lord Roydmore, the elderly gentleman who had never been so much as suspected of the folly of flirting, much less of dreaming of marrying again—by his daughter Jane. One of Mrs. Collette's hands was tenderly clasped in both of his; the other played listlessly with the flowers he had given her. The situation appeared to be full of sentiment, but there was nothing sentimental in the expression of her determined and rather dissatisfied face.

“It seems to me that we may go on in this indefinite way for the next ten years,” she began impatiently. “Jane is the only one of your children to

whom you owe the slightest explanation, for she is the only one whom it could affect in any way. Mrs. Graves is married and settled away, and your son has his own income and own chambers. I have made Jane like me." (Lord Roydmore winced.) "I am sure, as far as she is concerned, that you might tell her you are going to marry me without any fear of her making a fuss."

"I would rather defer—in fact, I *shall* defer—the explanation until my daughter Florence has paid us her visit and gone home again. I don't want my home peace destroyed by any wrangling with her."

Mrs. Collette snatched her hand away from him impatiently.

"Upon my word, Roydmore, I do believe that you're afraid of your eldest daughter. Nicely you must have spoilt her to let her get the upper hand of you so completely. Leave me to deal with her; I think I can hold my own with Mrs. Graves, or a dozen Mrs. Graves!"

"I don't mean my marriage to be made the occasion of a scandalous quarrel with my family," he said, with decision; "leave the matter to me entirely, and all will be arranged as you wish in due time."

"As '*I wish*'; that's a nice way of putting it."

"Well, as *we* wish, then. My dearest Helen, I think I have proved my fidelity and affection; but we are no longer young people, and it would not become us to be impetuous."

An angry flush rose to her face as he uttered the truism. Certainly they were "no longer young," but she looked a good thirty years his junior.

"I am not sure that it would not become us better than this senseless dawdling at your time of life."

"You would not be hard upon me, Helen, if you knew how I am hurrying on the alterations at Roydmore for your reception when we are married."

She made a grimace.

"You mean to go to Roydmore, then, and take me? Well, if you don't care, I am sure I needn't."

"It is more than twenty-two years since we either of us have been near the place. Some of the old servants are left, it is true, but no one who will remember you."

"Yet I should scarcely consider myself a person to be forgotten, Roydmore."

"My dearest, you were a lovely girl, little more than a lovely child, in fact, in those days. Now you are a glorious woman, Helen."

"Child as I was, I managed to turn the heads of two men down there, didn't I?" she asked laughingly, and he bent forward and kissed her lips with a sudden passion that startled her and surprised himself.

"I can't bear to hear you make the most distant allusion to the man you married, the villain who caused you so much misery."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't often think of him, much less speak of him," she said carelessly.

"How long ago did he die? Where was it? You've never told me any of the details of his death," he asked, with curious inconsistency.

"You hate to hear anything about him, and as I hate mentioning him, we will drop the subject, please," she replied coolly.

"At least he had the decency to leave you provided for when he deserted you. You have never known want, Helen?"

She coloured furiously, and flung up her head.

"I have not been utterly destitute of friends. You forget some of my people were very well off, and I have not been a castaway simply because I made an unfortunate marriage in my youth."

"The very memory of which shall be blotted out by the happiness of the marriage you will make in your maturity, my darling," he said, kissing her. But Mrs Collette had no fancy for his kisses. Whatever weaknesses she might have, they were not of a sentimental or amorous order. Accordingly she withdrew herself from his embrace, rose from her

chair, and stood away from him, picking the bouquet of carnations to pieces, and re-arranging them in glasses on a little occasional table. As she did so, she glanced at him now and again, and thought how elderly he looked, and how dull it would be if younger and more interesting men were henceforth not permitted to dangle about in her train.

“How badly these florists arrange their flowers, as a rule,” she said, tugging away at the slight links which bound the flowers together. “Do you know, Roydmore, if you hadn’t come along when you did and proposed to me, I should have gone into business as a lady florist. All the men would have come to me for buttonholes,” she wound up, with a laugh. “And you know,” she added, after a pause of a moment or two, “the trade blood in me would have been of service, and have made me a capital business woman.”

“Such a painful necessity is removed from your path for ever.”

“The necessity of doing something never has been painful to me. I could never be an indolent fine lady. I have done much harder work in my time than a florist has to do.”

“What work? What kind of work?” he asked anxiously.

“Oh, keeping the balance ; keeping people on as friends who wanted to be lovers. That’s awfully hard work at times, especially”—she stole a sly glance at him—“when the people were young and ardent and impressionable.”

“Your reminiscences are scarcely of an order to give me pleasure,” he said, rising up and she saw that he was offended. This did not disturb her at all. She held his written offer of marriage, and therefore he might exercise his capacity for taking offence to an unlimited extent. She had been wanting him to go for the last quarter of an hour, so she chose to take the fact of his rising from his chair as the prelude to his departure.

"Good-bye," she said, holding herself so that he could not possibly kiss her again. "Mind you assert yourself if your eldest daughter tries on any of her airs with you. If you don't I shall have to assert *myself*, and then there will be ructions. Tell Jane that I want her to come and meet a charming young man to-morrow; he's going to call on me about afternoon tea-time. Jane might do considerably worse than capture Captain Stafford, for he's well off, as handsome as a star, has the V.C., and holds a good staff appointment."

"Is he a new or an old acquaintance?" Lord Roydmore asked.

"He was a subaltern in Simla when I was out there with Dick; by the way, he knows the Graves, he's an old school-chum of your son-in-law's, and he has been staying at The Court; but he's not one of the crew who leads Mrs. Graves on to——"

"Don't say the word, don't say the word," Lord Roydmore interrupted, holding up his hand imploringly. "I can't even bear to hear such a thing rumoured of my daughter, though I feel there is no truth in the rumour."

"Nonsense! You ask her husband; they say that even in this short time she has half ruined him."

"Does his *friend* Captain Stafford tell you this?"

"No; he's as close as wax about everything that goes on at The Court. Only the other day, when I said I wanted to introduce Lord Roydmore's daughter, he said he 'knew one of them already,' in a tone that made me think he did not much care about knowing another. So then I told him what a dear girl Jane was, quite different to Mrs. Graves, and he's coming to-morrow."

"Be careful what you're about; be very sure of the stamp of man you introduce to *my* daughter, Helen."

"Captain Stafford is a man you can have no fear about; you'll understand that when you know him. He's thoroughly honourable; one of the *very* few really honourable men Dick ever introduced to me,"

she continued, with a scornful laugh. "But I am keeping you from your club—how selfish of me." Then she rang the bell, and smiled so winningly at him that she made him feel she was dismissing him summarily for the furtherance of his own pleasure.

Lord Roydmore had scarcely got himself out of the square in which Mrs. Collette lived, when a hansom dashed up to her door, and out of it got an old-fashioned looking, little round-about man, whose years probably numbered no more than Lord Roydmore's, but who might have been old enough to be that gentleman's father, one would have said at the first cursory glance.

Following him there stepped out of the hansom an elderly lady, cut on precisely the same pattern as himself. She also was round-about and old-fashioned in appearance, with a face brimming over with human kindness, and attired in the most expensive material and tasteless fashion. They looked thoroughly out of place, the pair of them, as they trotted through Helen Collette's theatrically-arranged hall into her meretriciously-furnished drawing-room. Yet they trotted as those to whom the ground was quite familiar, and they both embraced her as if she had been their own child.

"My brother has been quite miserable at not having seen or heard from you for a week, Helen," the old lady commenced, "but I tell him he is too exacting. We can't expect to have so much of you as we had before your old friend Lord Roydmore and you met again."

Helen Collette had the grace to blush as she answered glibly,—

"*Really*, I see very little of Lord Roydmore and Miss Herries. I try all I can to be kind to the poor motherless girl, who, although she is the Honourable Jane Herries, is a very ignorant little country bumpkin. But you know what a busy woman I am—or try to be. This appointment (which I owe to *you*—you dear things)—(this parenthetically, accompanied

by a filial embrace of both her portly little visitors)—takes up *all* my time nearly. Oh! I can assure you the post of corresponding Home Decorator on a fashionable weekly like the *Empress* is no sinecure. Why, people are actually writing to me now to ask what breed and colour of dog ‘goes best’ with their respective drawing-rooms and boudoirs.”

“Heartless creatures! they would change their faithful four-footed friends as they would their curtains and chair covers,” said old Miss Wyndham, who had many living specimens of highly-stuffed pugs’-skin at home. “My dear Helen, it must be a trying life, a very trying life for you, and few but ourselves know how nobly you fulfil the duties of it!”

The dear, fat old lady brought tears of heartfelt admiration and sympathy into her eyes as she said this, and Mrs. Collette sustained her claim to being a first-rate amateur actress by looking quite modestly abashed and virtuously gratified at receiving all this undeserved praise.

“But what we’ve come to say, my dear Helen, is that we feel you want a little holiday,” Mr. Wyndham struck in; “a little holiday which we hope you will take with us abroad. And in order that you may do it comfortably, and leave an efficient substitute at the *Empress* office, I want you to accept—my sister and I want you to accept—this.”

He put a cheque for three hundred pounds in her hand as he spoke, and Helen thanked him with tears in her pretty, bewitching eyes. But she had not the faintest intention of taking her “little holiday” with the Wyndhams for all that.

By and by, after sipping some tea, which Helen gave to them out of one of the loveliest little old Queen Anne silver services extant (a gift from Mr. Wyndham), the kind-natured, confiding brother and sister departed, ejaculating as they went words of admiration for her “persistent courage,” and entreaties that “she would not over-do herself with work.” Mrs. Collette gave them this promise—and kept it! She was

not a woman ever to be "over-done" by hard work. Whatever the nature of her work might be, she always came to the encounter with a clear head, and a hearty determination to *do it!* And this was why she was so invariably successful in every effort she had made. She had never permitted herself to grow lax, or indifferent, or despondent. In view of her own splendid personality, she, as a woman of the world, could be none of these things.

With an untouched heart, with an unsullied reputation, with the prospect of soon becoming Lady Roydmore before her, and a cheque for three hundred pounds in her hand, she ought to have been a happy woman.

She ought to have been! but—there was a "but" in the situation, blithely and brightly as she seemed to fill it. Personally, though they had been lovers long ago when he was young, she had a feeling so strong that it almost amounted to aversion to Lord Roydmore. He was dull and fussily ill-tempered about trifles that were deadly uninteresting to her. He had lost the spring and vivacity of youth, and she was quick to discern that he held himself erect with an effort. Anything like plainness or physical decrepitude was revolting to her. His caresses sometimes made her wholly hate him, and feel half ashamed of herself. Manliness, vigour, vitality and good looks were things that she worshipped, and she won a man who possessed all these things to love her. But this man could not lift her up to the position she had always aspired to fill—the position she had angled for and lost when she was a young girl, and as beautiful as an houri. It had been the dream of her life to become Lady Roydmore, and if Lord Roydmore had come to her in the guise of a satyr, she would have accepted him. As it was, she only nursed a feeling for him that made Lord Roydmore's affectionate words and loving actions loathsome to her. At times she controlled herself, and submitted to them with what seemed like stoical indifference; but at other times

she sickened under them, and resented them in a way that puzzled him, as simultaneously she would try to hasten on the marriage with all the force of her eloquence. In short, she was a conundrum to Lord Roydmore, and one that he was never likely to guess.

For several weeks she had succeeded in keeping her affianced husband from either meeting or having the faintest suspicion of the existence of either the young man whom she loved, or the old man on whose bounty she was enabled to live so pleasantly. But the strain was rather severe sometimes, when the door was opened to the man who was not to be allowed up into her drawing-room on account of its being already in possession of one or other of the trio who had gained admission first. Servants are apt to get confused when such delicately complicated situations are sprung upon them four or five times a week. There was really no just cause nor impediment why these three men should not have met and been civil to one another. But Helen Collette loved the look of a mystery. It pleased her to think that they would all have been madly jealous one of another, and it did not please her to think how surely she would go down in the estimation of the younger man when he should make the discovery that she had played a treacherously double game, and played it not for love, but for the sake of being "Lady Roydmore."

This day, which had witnessed her acceptance of Lord Roydmore's carnations and old Mr. Wyndham's cheque for three hundred pounds, she chose to regard as a culminating point, an important crisis in her career. She made a large resolution, a resolution the pain and importance of which, perhaps, only a woman can understand, for men do not suffer so keenly when they write "Finis" to even the most warmly love-lit romance as does even a selfish woman. The resolution Mrs. Collette made on this day was that she would wind up her love-making with Captain Stafford, and try to turn him into a friend by marrying him to Jane Herries. By that means, she could continue

to keep in with him, continue to see him, and, perhaps, continue to exert her influence over him. She gauged her own strength very accurately ; there would be no danger for her in the continued intercourse, which would help to relieve the stagnant monotony of her married life with Lord Roydmore.

And if there was danger to Jane's happiness or Captain Stafford's honour in the contemplated arrangement, why, they must aver it as well as they can. "I must look out for myself," she said, with the frank, intolerant selfishness that was so characteristic of her.

CHAPTER V.

CARNATION TIME.

THE friendship between Helen Collette and Captain Stafford was an affair of five years' standing, and it had been marked by countless phases of feeling and demeanour. He had fallen very rapidly and madly in love with her beautiful person, and her charmingly frank and vigorous manner, when first he had met her, and as she was a thorough woman of the world, he had not hesitated to tell her so. But in those days he was only an impecunious subaltern, whose elder brother was alive, and in such good, robust health that Harry Stafford's prospects of coming into any of the family loaves and fishes had been *nil*, apparently. Accordingly, though she had surrendered her heart to his persistent and passionate pleading, she had refused to marry him, and for a time the repulse had made him a more desperate lover than ever. The fire of his passion was fanned into a fiercer flame by the free use Helen made of every art and allurements of which she was mistress. She would not have him for her husband because poverty and obscurity, and the loss of Mr. Wyndham's convenient cheques, would be her

portion if she married him. She loved him in her way—and hers was a very warm and enthralling one when she pleased—and the possibility of any other woman catching his heart in the rebound drove her frantic. Accordingly, she kept him on by cleverly administered doses of hope and despair, keeping her own head the while, though giving the fullest verbal expression to her love for him.

During his absences from England, she plied him with letters that were calculated to raise the temperature of any climate in which he received them. Such loving, flattering, sympathetic letters they were, never too long, never crossed, and never tedious. He thought he read her heart in every word, and cursed the lack of means which made her prudent “for his sake,” as she told him.

But somehow or other, when, by that robust elder brother's death, “lack of means” no longer stood between his Helen and himself, a something else interposed. Absence had made him more ardent than ever, when he returned to England rich and distinguished, and sought her without delay. But his ardour was damped when she showed more anxiety to speak of marriage than of love. Her practicality chilled him. She showed the harder and more scheming side of her character just at the time when she should have been most tender and trustful. Even if she had no sympathy with him in the sorrow he felt at his brother's death, he would have liked her better had she feigned a little. Instead of which, she was now in as great a hurry to secure him legally, as she had formerly been anxious to keep the legal tie at bay.

He was chilled and disappointed, and he showed that he was those things. Then the usual thing happened. She reproached him with being “cool and changed,” until her reproaches first became wearisome, and then odious to him. She grew jealous of the most shadowless women. She disparaged those whom he liked, and called him to account for every

idle word he uttered to the girls with whom he danced, and the women he took in to dinner. Finally—most fatal step of all—she “reminded” him of his former vows and protestations to herself, and scolded him for having grown slack in proffering them now, until he held aloof from her, in the hope that her jealousy would make her break with him altogether. When he took this receding step she grew frightened, and implored him with such passionate fervour “to come back to her, if only as a friend,” that he acceded to her request, and once more entangled his feet in the net spread for him by a woman of whom he had begun to get sick.

Fortunately for Harry Stafford, Lord Roydmore came upon the scene at this juncture, and Helen Collette adapted herself to circumstances. The old love could give her more tangible good things than the young one, and in the days to come she would be able so to pose before the world as to make the now indifferent young lover covet her favour, and long for her love again. So she accepted the man who bored and sometimes revolted her, and longed for the time when she could proclaim her social triumph, and perhaps give Harry Stafford’s heart one wrench before she had finally done with him.

But, in the meantime, while she was waiting and chafing for Lord Roydmore’s consent to make their engagement public, she used every syren spell she knew to make Captain Stafford her own trusting sweetheart again. She ceased from worrying him to come to her constantly ; she refrained from reproaching him when he stayed away. But when he came she gave him sweet welcomes and warm words, letting him understand that though he had taught her to feel that marriage was out of the question between them, still she was ready to be loyal, loving and true to him without any ulterior views.

It staggered and annoyed him when first he discovered that she was ready to let his mad promises and protestations limply fall away into the limbo of

forgotten things. He had no wish to keep these promises. He knew that he would find her a terrible failure if ever he were mad enough to make her his. Still, when she seemed resigned to the relinquishment of this prospect, his vanity was hurt, and his curiosity stirred to discover the cause.

On this day, when she had invited Jane to five o'clock tea with her, she had taken care to have Captain Stafford to luncheon, in order that all the explanations might be got over and the atmosphere cleared before Miss Herries came upon the boards.

She had prepared the stage and dressed for her part in the scene that was to ensue with care. In common with the majority of women, she desired that this lost lover of hers should carry away an impression of her that should haunt him all his life. He should regret having lost the right to enter within the sweet precincts of that rose-tinted, rose-scented room whenever it pleased him. He should regret the right to utter and listen to warm, sweet words of love from the beautiful lips that never permitted themselves to fall into hard lines when observant man was present. He should regret no longer being at liberty to take the slim, firm, ring-covered fingers in his own, and caress and kiss them as much as seemed good to him!

He should remember all these things vividly, and regret them passionately at times as long as the blood coursed quickly and warmly through his veins.

It was not a kind-hearted determination at which to have arrived. But when a woman is forced into facing openly a future which she detests, she is apt to feel an inclination to give a parting twinge to the one to whom she owes the position. If Harry Stafford had met her views and married her when first fortune smiled upon him, she would "not have been tempted to give herself to methodical, tedious old Roydmore," she told herself. At the same time, she vowed that no amount of supplication from Harry for a renewal of their engagement should move her now.

Sentiment was dead within her. She had settled herself to be Lady Roydmore.

She had a magnificent figure, and the upper portion of her pearl-grey silk and pink velvet tea-gown fitted her like a sheath. It showed every line of the straight back that slendered away so gracefully to the waist, every curve of the shapely shoulders and broad bust. She looked a superb woman in it, her well-held head rising freely above multitudinous folds of fine old lace, that would have looked as if they were choking a shorter-throated woman. She looked a superb woman, and she knew it, and wondered how Harry Stafford would bear the entire renunciation of her.

Though he had accepted her invitation to lunch, he had done it reluctantly, and he had come unwillingly. He feared that the hollow truce of friendship between them which had now existed for some weeks would be broken through by her, and that once again she would partly coax and partly coerce him into renewing those old, loving relations, which, if renewed now, must end in marriage. He remembered so many things about her now to which he had been blind during the height of his passion.

"She was hot-tempered and exacting, vain, and several years older than himself. It would be awfully hard lines if she ran him in, and made him marry her against his will."

His thoughts were running in this groove when he came into the room, and found her writing, her back turned to the door. For a minute he stood there, thinking she had not heard him enter. But she undeceived him by suddenly throwing down her pen, wheeling round in her chair, holding out her hand, and saying, with her most winning smile,—

"It is so good of you to have come, Harry. I am disappointed of a man I asked to meet you, and now I am scribbling a note in frantic haste to ask the Wyndhams to fill the vacuum."

"For heaven's sake do nothing of the kind. We don't want the Wyndhams, or any one else," he added

earnestly ; for already the recollection that she was hot-tempered, exacting, vain and several years older than himself was fading away from his mind. " We don't want any one, Helen ; tear it up ! "

She hesitated for a moment, then, yielding to his wishes, she tore it up and consigned it to the waste-paper basket, for which receptacle it had been destined from the first. Then she rose and walked over to her own special chair, with its back to the rose-coloured light, waving him into another at some distance from hers as she did so.

There was something in the atmosphere that puzzled and fired him. The frankly free air of friendship which had existed for some time had vanished ; in its place a sweet, sad, cool restraint, that might be but the precursor of a storm, or that might be significant of the end of all things. Never in his life had he seen her look so beautiful. There was a suspicion of tears in her eyes. She had been crying bitterly, indeed, but it had been over some pressing bills. However, this he did not know, and he thought the tears were on his account ; but while she kept him at bay in this undefinable way, he could neither ask her to confide her sorrows to him, nor soothe the tears away with kisses.

They lunched together presently without the restricting presence of a servant, but still Helen made no use of the opportunity to re-storm the citadel of his heart. He had been prepared to make a strong resistance had she done so, for in his calmer moments he realised intensely what an unsuitable wife she would be for him. But now, as she did not do it, he forgot the unsuitability, and felt aggrieved.

She looked so handsome all the time, too, and never, *never* in the course of all their long acquaintanceship had she shown herself to be possessed of such a bitterly-sweet vein of mingled pathos and humour. This revealed itself to him more especially after luncheon, when they had gone back to the rose-tinted drawing-room, which had been re-deco-

rated during their absence with glorious masses of huge carnations of every shade, varying from white, through all the shades of pink, to crimson.

"What does this mean, you extravagant woman?" he asked. "When we went in to luncheon, the room was smothered with my favourite yellow roses."

"It only means that the time of roses is past, and the riper glory of the carnation time is coming," she said, throwing off the shade of sadness. "Be a candid friend, and admit that the carnations suit my maturity better than the roses did. Lord Roydmore sent me the carnations; he has exquisite taste."

For an instant Captain Stafford allowed himself to feel outraged. Then he remembered what a ghastly feeling of chagrin, not to say disgust, would have been his portion if she had either bothered or beguiled him into marrying her. As it was, she deserved his warmest gratitude for the really picturesque and pleasant way in which she had prepared him for the new order of things.

"Thank you for telling me so much in such a sweet way, and reward me for the stoicism with which I have borne the tidings, by giving me a carnation for a button-hole, and pinning it in for me."

She pinned it in with dexterous, untrembling fingers. He was not going to give her any trouble, she felt. At the same time, his eyes told her plainly enough that he admired her more than ever.

"I have told you *nothing* yet, remember that, Captain Stafford. I have made no statement to you. I simply say that carnations become my mature years better than roses, and that Lord Roydmore gave me the carnations. By the way, I expect his daughter Jane here presently. I wonder what you'll think of her?"

"Is she like her sister? If she is, I have an appointment!"

"Not a bit like Mrs. Graves; but I won't describe her. You shall judge her for yourself. Your taste is unerring."

She shot one glance at him as she said this, a glance that made him wish she wore the roses still. An inconsistent wish on his part, certainly, considering he had come there primed with the intention of breaking with her altogether, if he could do so with honour and without cruelty.

But now that she had taken the initiative so unmistakably, by substituting the carnations of another man for the yellow roses which she had hitherto always affected, because they were his favourite flowers, he experienced a sharp twinge of mortified vanity, which he mistook for a pang of wounded love.

"You are right in saying that my taste is 'unerring'; so it is as far as looks are concerned, for it selected you; but I'm no judge of a woman's heart, I find. You're throwing me over with about as much feeling as if I were an old glove."

"And you? What have you been doing for the last few weeks? You haven't exactly 'thrown me over,'—it would have been against your code of honour to do that,—but you have done worse. You have been cooling gradually, and giving me long-drawn-out agonies. Now, let us be sensible, and cease from reproaching each other." She paused for a moment, and then added, with one of those rapid transitions of manner which was one of her strongest weapons, "Believe me, Harry, the time I have passed with you has been the happiest part of my life. Say that it has been a happy time for you too, now that it is over."

Her voice broke with a real sob as she spoke the last words and a look came into her eyes that told him there had been real feeling in the way she had played her part in this romantic farce. He knew that it was time the curtain should be rung down. Still, he could not help feeling that the romantic farce had been a pretty one to play in.

CHAPTER VI.

A FLOWER LESSON.

IF Mrs. Collette really wished to bring about anything resembling a tender feeling between Miss Herries and Captain Stafford, she did a very unwise thing in causing them to meet immediately after she had written "Finis" to the love-story between Stafford and herself.

If, on the other hand, she only wanted to *appear* to be magnanimously desirous of consoling him for her defection by giving him the chance of making a younger, fresher woman her rival, then she had acted with discretion.

The appearance of the pair upon whom Jane presently poured herself with punctuality and impetuosity gave her a slight shock. Traces of tears were still to be seen in Mrs. Collette's pretty eyes, and the handsome, distinguished-looking man who was Mrs. Collette's sole companion looked unmistakably sulky. It flashed upon Jane in a moment that she was not wanted by either of these people, and in her young indignation at having been invited to put herself in the false position of the proverbially unwanted third, she said,—

"I have only come in to tell you that I can't stay. I have some shopping to do that must get itself done to-day."

"Now, Jane, that's nonsense." Mrs. Collette had the girl fast by the hand as she spoke. "I am desperately low-spirited and unhappy to-day, and you are to stay here and brighten me up. Having no daughter of my own, I shall make *you* play dutiful daughter to me for a little time."

She lifted Jane's tightly-gloved cool young hand

to her forehead, and Jane's sympathies were aroused at once. The brow was hot and throbbing, and the sweet eyes that looked up from under it were unmistakably dewy still. In a moment Jane forgot all her antagonism of yesterday against this woman. Mrs. Collette had been very kind to her, and Mrs. Collette was now evidently in pain.

"You dear! I'll play dutiful daughter or any other part you please," she said, flinging her arms round Helen's neck. Then as the latter, who was really overstrained from having passed through such various phases of emotion, sobbed for a moment or two with genuine feeling, Jane obeyed a natural impulse and called on the only other occupant of the room for aid.

"Bring that *eau de cologne*, and come and bathe her forehead, and—do you think you had better rub her other hand?"

"No, no, Jane," Mrs. Collette protested, laughing in spite of herself at the turn affairs had taken; "my hands are quite hot enough already, and I wouldn't have a drop of *eau de cologne* on my forehead for the world; it spoils the skin dreadfully. Remember that, young lady, when you're inclined to try it as a remedy for a pain in your temples. Captain Stafford, let me introduce you to Miss Herries. Jane, you dear, careless, child, you have pulled my hair out of shape. While I go and have it put straight, ring for tea, and try to make Captain Stafford forget the little exhibition of feminine fatigue to which I have treated him."

She had swept to the door as she spoke, and in a moment more they were alone, and Jane was feeling that the world held something which she had never dreamt of before! A man, namely, upon whom it was a Heaven-born privilege to look. "He's different to every one else in the whole world," she thought, though in what the difference consisted she would have found it hard to define.

As for him, he was more struck with the beauty of Helen's generosity in bringing him into easy, social

relations with this girl than he was with the beauty of the girl herself. By this final action Helen had glorified herself in his eyes more than ever, and more than ever he wished that the yellow roses still held sway over her.

Mrs. Collette's hair took some time to rearrange. The man and girl who were thus incontinently thrown together were compelled to get themselves out of the glacial period, and to assume a decent air of recognition of one another's presence. If Jane had been a fashionably frozen young lady, or an effusively fast one, Captain Stafford would have wrapped himself up in a cloak of reserve, and allowed her to "gang her ain gait." But she was neither of these things. She was simply "a wonderfully pretty, boyishly frank little girl," he thought. So he exerted himself to make the period of waiting for Mrs. Collette's reappearance less irksome to her.

He tried her on the topic of flowers first, and presently they found themselves going round the room studying the various effective grouping of Malmaison carnations with nothing but their own foliage, which filled every available space in Helen's room. Jane warmed to the theme.

"They are papa's favourite flowers! He ought to be here to-day as Mrs. Collette has done her room with them, oughtn't he?" she asked, lifting her violet eyes to Harry Stafford's so suddenly, that he felt like a traitor for concealing from her that the carnations were there, not only with Lord Roydmore's knowledge and consent, but by his good-will and bounty also.

"What is your favourite flower?" he asked.

"I have five," she said, spreading out her little hand and checking them off on her fingers as she enumerated them rapidly. "Violets of all kinds—chiefly Neapolitan, lilies of the valley (aren't they dears?), yellow roses——"

"They're mine, but I'll let you have a share in them," he interrupted.

"Are they *really*?" she cried delightedly, at having discovered a fellow-feeling in this unique being. "Gardenia and cowslips."

She had poised herself on the arm of a chair, and he had seated himself on a very low stool at her feet, while she had been making out her list. Now when she paused, the forefinger of her right hand resting on the little finger of the left, which represented cowslips, he put his hand out quickly and grasped hers.

"Stop a moment," he exclaimed in explanation of his action, "don't break off yet. I'll bet I'll give you five more that you will admit you like equally well with those you've named. I am sure you're not a niggard in your love for flowers."

"Go on," Jane said gravely. Her thoughts had travelled back to Bath, and its beautiful old flower-market. She forgot that he was holding her hands.

"Now, listen!" he said, separating the pale grey kids, and taking each one into single keeping in his own; "don't be impatient, but weigh well the merits of each flower as I name it. Don't be in a hurry to agree with me, but just listen while I put their respective claim before you. Honeysuckle——"

"Oh! honeysuckle's sweet; I forgot it."

"You did, but you mustn't forget it again, nor will you when I have pleaded its cause. You say it's sweet. What makes its sweetness?"

"Why—its sweetness, to be sure," Jane cried uneasily. "Now, please, *don't* go and be scientific. It *is* sweet, and I know it's sweet, and I don't want to know why it's sweet."

"But you shall know," he whispered, laughing; "it is sweet out of pure good-heartedness. It is the flower that refines and perfumes the atmosphere amidst which most of the rustic love-making goes on. Lubin learns to say prettier things to his Chloe under the influence of the honeysuckle's breath than he would say if only the odours of turnips were being wafted around him."

"Tell me another flower that I must put on my list." Jane took one hand gently away from him as she spoke, not because the suggestion of there being the slightest impropriety in his retaining it occurred to her mind, but simply because a thread from her veil was tickling her nose, and she needed a hand to take the veil off.

"You're shamefully ignorant if you haven't learnt to love white heather?"

"It's pretty, but has no scent."

"Indeed it has, the most delicate imaginable—so delicate as to be almost imperceptible to any but the most cultivated nostril. Fairies, kelpies, and you and I enjoy it, of course."

"My brother Jack shall bring me a large consignment of white heather when he comes back from Scotland, and I'll send you a pot full of it, Captain Stafford."

"That will be a very laudable action on your part. Myrtle; of course you had momentarily forgotten myrtle when you made out your list? It's the real bridal flower; orange blossom is rather coarse for the bridal wreath, don't you think?"

"Not coarse; no, no, no!"

"Just think for a moment. The blossom in due time develops into the fruit which brings third-class railway carriages and Hampstead Heath vividly to one's memory; but you know nothing of third-class railway carriages and Hampstead Heath."

"Don't I, though? We never went in anything else before grandpapa died; and as for Hampstead Heath, I rode my first donkey there, and thought I was quite in the wild whirl of fashionable life when I did it. Now for your last two before I ring for tea."

"I avoid all the swells in Flora's kingdom, you observe? I'll complete my list with the names of two very old friends—the 'white' bluebell and the little wild geranium. You are to be especially devoted to the white bluebells in future. My mother used to say

they were the bells on which the music of the angel Israfel is rung."

"The white bluebell is the dearest of all the list," Jane was saying with solemn eagerness, when Mrs. Collette came in with renovated hair and restored courage, notwithstanding, this latter fact, though the sight of these two people hand-in-hand tried her rather severely.

"Why, Jane," she began sharply, "are you an invalid, and is Captain Stafford your physician?"

"Oh, he's not feeling my pulse," Jane said unconcernedly. "We got talking about flowers, and were ticking off our favourites on my fingers."

A rich carnation flush crept up into Helen's cheeks for a moment, but she subdued the angry emotion which produced it with a courage that was admirable, considering how every gesture, word and look of the man concerned had power to thrill her still. She had gone out of the room, leaving them alone for the express purpose of allowing these people to become acquainted with each other naturally, unfettered by her presence. Yet, now that they seemed to be so excellently well acquainted, she felt in a rage, and wished that she had been less magnanimous and more careless as to the appearance of her hair.

Meantime, Captain Stafford was far less struck or smitten with Jane Herries than Mrs. Collette believed and feared him to be. He thought her a "pretty girl, smart and good form," but he was not at all sure that she was not prettily pretending to be very much more unconventional, and fearlessly regardless of Mrs. Grundy, than she was in reality.

"A girl who lets a fellow hold her hand for ten minutes the first time she meets him, knows how many broad beans make five," he told himself, and it occurred to him that she would not have done this if he had not been a V. C. man, and the owner of a grand old place with a fine rent-roll. As a matter of fact, Jane had never heard of him before this day, or of his decoration, grand old place and fine rent-roll at

all. He merely did her the injustice which an eligible man is apt to do a girl who seems to like him—of thinking her mercenary, and of being ready to leap into matrimony with any man who could please her well at first sight.

Now the Honourable Jane was very much a child of nature still. In the old impecunious, uncultivated days at Bath, she had been left, as has been told, very much to her own devices, and she had caught up the dangerous trick of responding with fatal celerity to any one or anything that showed her kindness. Her love of being loved, or at least liked, had grown, and strengthened on the nipping system which Florence had applied to it. If a cur wagged its tail to her affably in the street, she forthwith wanted to take that cur home, and nourish and cherish it. If a man paid her a little courteous attention, she instantly longed to do him some kindness in return, especially if the man was nice. The idea of matrimony had scarcely entered her head yet. In course of time she supposed she would marry, but no individual man had suggested the supposition to her. So now she really felt grateful to Captain Stafford for the kind way in which he had enlarged the borders of her special floral loves, and showed her gratitude by listening with delighted attention to every word he spoke.

These words were not many. Helen's presence threw a shade over what had been, a few minutes before, the sunniest manner Jane had ever seen displayed by man. The habit of loving Helen had been upon him for so many years that it seemed like beginning life anew to find that henceforth the habit must be relinquished. Though she had not told him in so many words, he realised that she was going to marry Lord Roydmore. Her remarks about his carnations being better adapted to her mature years than the yellow roses which belonged to bygone days and Harry Stafford, had unmistakably pointed to that conclusion, and though, when he entered the house, he had been as averse to marrying her as a man well

could be, he now felt annoyed that to this other conclusion affairs had come. His mood was contradictory, but essentially human, and his heart was not caught in the rebound by Jane's beauty, youth and grateful desire to please him. When he left them, as he did very soon, it was on Helen that his eyes lingered last, and it was Helen's hand—the cruel hand that had just crushed the last bit of romance out of their affair—which won the warmest pressure from his. Already he had forgotten the episode of the flower lesson. Already he had forgotten the thrilling touch of Jane's confiding little fingers. In the presence of the married woman, who diffused such an atmosphere of autumnal splendour, the spring-like beauty and freshness of the young girl was shone down effectually.

There was a brief silence between the two women after the door had closed after him, then Helen asked,—

“What do you think of Captain Stafford, Jane?”

“He has made every other man seem insignificant.”

“You susceptible goose,” Mrs. Collette said, laughing, but not unkindly. “Well, my dear, I may as well tell you he has a way of making other men seem insignificant in most women's eyes. I am glad you like him. I want you——”

She pulled herself up abruptly. Even she could not bring herself to say that she wanted another woman to do more than like Harry Stafford.

She was as little addicted to the folly of indulging in useless retrospection as any woman that ever lived. But she could not obliterate in a moment the memory of all the fond fooling which had gone on between them for years. She knew that, if she had beguiled him into marrying her, her seniority would have told against her in his heart and taste in a very short time. Nevertheless, the thought that he had wanted to marry her once was passing pleasant to her.

Jane had been wandering about the room while these thoughts flew through Helen's mind, and now

the girl spoke, and turned Mrs. Collette's mind from the past to the future.

"Your carnations are lovely. Apparently you're as fond of them as papa, only the habit of old days is upon him so strongly that he won't indulge in the extravagance of buying more than one at a time for his button-hole."

It was an excellent opportunity for breaking the ice. Should she take it? For a few seconds Helen hesitated, then she said,—

"As he is such a niggard about them as regards himself, you'll be surprised to hear that it was Lord Roydmore who sent me all these."

Jane came across the room with a bound and stood by her friend's chair, her head thrown up, and a look of anger on her face.

"If he did, he must be infatuated, gone silly about you. How can you encourage him to do it—an old man like papa?"

"Perhaps I may not consider him silly for being 'infatuated,' as you call it, with me. Indeed, I am very much flattered."

"But it's horrid of you to lead him on to make himself ridiculous, for, of course, you wouldn't think of him, an old man like papa, with a son of twenty-six."

"I think of him so much that I have promised to marry him," Helen said calmly.

CHAPTER VII.

TROUBLE AT THE COURT.

THERE was trouble at the Court. The adoring young husband and the adored young wife had been having the most serious difference which had yet disturbed their married lives.

For some months past Mrs. Graves had been living a life of the wildest excitement, in spite of that life

being spent in the pure and peaceful country in which she had been wont to declare she felt buried alive. She was alternately a prey to the most exuberant happiness and the most dismal depression. Remorse had not become her portion yet, but recklessness had done so, for she had joined the army of female gamblers which is devastating the land, and was looked upon as one of its most promising recruits.

The beginning of this miserable end had been at the house of a country neighbour, who had a few years ago made an enormous fortune out of one of the wealthiest mines in Cornwall. Finding that his family had no chance of rising in the social scale down near the cradle of their race, he brought them up to Somersetshire; bought a magnificent property with a grand old hall upon it, and started as a gentleman, "who 'ad no call to turn his 'and to anything any longer."

His wife was past that period of life when a vulgar woman can by some occult means be transmuted into a smart one. But she was an easy, affable, kind-mannered woman, who allowed a clever maid to dictate what she should wear, and permitted her daughters to order her when to speak and when to be silent. She was also always ready to open her purse and let its contents flow out freely whenever she was appealed to for any cause deserving, or the reverse. It gave her no pain when she found that, in spite of the ancestral hall and the regiment of servants, the gorgeous furniture and handsome carriages and horses, the county held aloof from her and hers. But her son and two daughters were anything but resigned to this state of things. The son had been got into a cavalry regiment. The daughters had been well-educated on the surface, and though neither clever nor accomplished, could hold their own conversationally in a slangy, smart way that gained them the gratifying reputation of being "jolly girls, real ripping ones, with no nonsense about them." They were very gallant, too, and un-

questionably deserved the order for distinguished service in the social field. They were always sallying forth and bidding the select who looked askew at them enter into their father's hospitable halls and be dined, and luncheoned, and *fêted* in every conceivable way. And they were always meeting with rebuffs when they did so.

Their name was not a bad-sounding one, though it was borne by hundreds of the fisher and mining folk in around the barren little Cornish village where they had been born. Penarth has quite a pretty and almost a distinguished tone about it when it is sacred to one family only in a neighbourhood. They humbly thanked Providence that they had not to bear the burden of a hideous surname in addition to the absence of h's from the vocabulary of their papa and mamma. And they bore the buffetings they received from the Somerset county people philosophically, feeling sure that the day would come when the Penarths would be able to buffet other aspirants in their turn.

They had great, and as it turned out justifiable, reliance on their brother Arthur. He was regarded rather as a bit of a cad in the corps to which he belonged; at the same time he had the recognised power of the purse in it. One autumn he was able to bring down three or four men of family, means, position and current smartness to stay at the Hall for ten days. It happened to be young Mrs. Graves' first autumn in Somersetshire, and she became absorbed into the Penarth circle with a celerity that flattered them immensely, for Mrs. Graves, senior (Geoffrey's mother), and his exemplary sisters had held themselves not only aloof from, but aloft over, the Penarths, and it pleased them well, therefore, to draw the younger, brighter representative of the Graves' into their net.

The people whom she ought to have cottoned to and liked were dull. Day after day, existence dragged on its dreary, changeless round at The Court. Everything

about her was substantially comfortable and well assured, and there was much that was beautiful in the time-sanctified home to which her husband had brought her. But Florence Graves soon got to look upon old oak carving, antique silver, priceless china and rare jewellery that was not entailed as so much convertible property merely. "What's the use of anything, save so much money as 'twill bring," became her motto.

To bring men of the right stamp down to the Hall had been the work of young Mr. Penarth. To retain them there, to get them to recur and bring others along with them, was the pleasing task assigned to the Misses Penarth. They soon learnt from their brother that, in order to do this, they must inaugurate some other form of entertainment wherewith to while away the hours of the night than amateur music, billiards and conversation, especially as neither the native music nor the conversation were of a brilliant order. So play became the order of the night, and the game they played was baccarat.

The recklessness and utter absence of science in the game commended itself speedily and strongly to Florence Graves. One of the most skilled performers at the specially-prepared magic table then instructed her in its mysteries, and before Geoffrey realised that "Flo's new fad" was more than a mere pastime, she had become inoculated with such a love for it, as made life without it seem a dismal waste.

When she won, she was so dazzlingly happy that her husband had not the heart to check her; and when she lost, she bore the blow so bravely, and defrayed her debts of honour so secretly, that he knew nothing about it. But still the unceasing, unrelenting way in which she followed up her intimacy with the Penarths annoyed and perplexed him. She allowed them to absorb her completely into their circle, and almost put her on her honour to stand by them when the traditional, time-established people in the neighbourhood glanced askance, or openly condemned

them for turning their house into a private hell. She "stood up for them" so vehemently, that she became entangled in the net-work of her own utterances, and as they gave her unstinted praise for her "pluck and staunchness," she felt herself to be plenteously rewarded for having to endure the disapprobation of her husband and all her steadier-going, warmer-hearted but cooler-headed friends.

During Captain Stafford's visit to The Court, he had been carried several times in his hostess' train to Penarth Hall. That he had gone there very much against his will availed him not a bit. He was quoted as "one of the Penarth set," and made to feel himself a renegade if he did not admit the soft impeachment. Not having the instincts of a gambler, but having the instincts of a man, he allowed himself to drift into a surface flirtation with the prettiest Miss Penarth. He meant nothing, Helen being still the peg on which he hung the warmest feeling he had ever had for a woman. But Miss Penarth meant a great deal, and was good enough to make her meaning clearly manifest; so manifest, indeed, that Captain Stafford brought his visit to the Graves' to an abrupt conclusion, and left, swearing to himself that nothing should ever tempt him to put his foot inside Penarth Hall again.

This had happened some time before he had the interview with Helen Collette which has been described, and in the interim he had done his best to stir his friend, Geoffrey Graves, up to a sense of the danger his wife was incurring by her intimacy with the Penarths, who fostered and encouraged her gambling propensities. At first, Geoffrey had turned a deaf ear to his friend's warnings, but, after a time, Florence's calls upon his cheque-book passed the bonds even of his tolerance, and he first implored and enreated, and finally commanded her to give up both play and the Penarths.

That she did neither was only what might have been expected from Florence,

Her very disobedience pleased Geoffrey. Above all things he admired pluck and stamina, and though Florence was exhibiting these qualities in a light that was unpleasant to him, he liked her the better for doing it.

"You may lead her with a bit of silk, but by Jove, she's too mettlesome to be driven," he told his mother, when that lady affectionately reviled him for not insisting upon Florence relinquishing the Penarths and their perilous amusements.

"You will rue the day you married her, and you know I have always told you so, Geoffrey," she answered injudiciously. Whereupon Geoffrey smothered an oath, and declared that nothing would ever make him regret, much less rue, his marriage.

"I'd do it again to-morrow. Flo and I are as happy as any two people can be."

"But, my dear boy, she is impoverishing you. I am told——"

"I wish you wouldn't listen to the tellings of a set of cursed gossips. It's hard that my wife can't have a little amusement without my own mother finding fault with me about it. The beastly scandal-mongers make as much of her losing a few pounds as if she were squandering thousands."

"People say it has come to that, Geoffrey."

"Then people lie," he said hotly; and for a little time his mother believed him, and was happy.

But though he defended her doings, and stuck up for her stoutly when others ventured to asperse her, he fought against her infatuation vigorously in private. He tried every means of which he was master to break her of a habit which he foresaw, more clearly than any one could point out to him, meant ruin. Affectionate remonstrances, autocratic commands, common-sense pleadings, all these he tried in turn, and all failed. The deadly fascination was upon her, and when she could not play she bet upon every trivial event that happened in the neighbourhood, and being impulsive and inexperienced, she nearly always lost.

Dissatisfaction with her fortunes naturally made her dissatisfied with her own family and with Geoffrey's. She wrote reproachful letters to her father, and angry ones to Jane, because she had not been given a freer fling in the town house of the Herries'. She had flouted the Graves' by openly preferring the Penarths, and the more agreeable foreign element in the Penarths' set, to these safer, steadier, and, it must be conceded, duller relations and friends who would, now that it was too late, have been all that was affectionate, gracious and subservient to her if only she would have entered into alliance with them. Florence would have none of them, and at times Geoffrey almost ranged himself on her side. These were the times when she would remind him that his mother and sisters had never liked her from the first, and had always opposed their marriage. "They tried to separate us, dear Geof," she would say plaintively; "*how* can I ever forget that and profess friendship for them, though, of course, I forgive them?" This line of argument would flatter Geoffrey into siding with his wife now and again, but these occasions recurred less and less frequently as time went on.

As time went on, too, poor Geoffrey had another grievance. "One of the smartest men of Arthur's set," as the Misses Penarth designated him, was also one of the most frequent visitors at Penarth Hall. He had a strong reputation for every kind of gallantry, and while women were wont to admire him immensely for the nobler, courageous kind, they were secretly fascinated, far too much to be good for them, by attentions that were the offspring of the other order. He was brilliant and versatile, equally good at the arts of war and peace, wrote war correspondence like a journalist, had shown himself a fine soldier in action, was as daring and defiant in his open pursuit of every pretty and charming woman he met, as if she and she alone existed for him; and indulged in a lavish generosity towards those who pleased him that made the better sort dread to express

admiration for any procurable object in his presence.

That this man's strong personality and magnificent physique soon exercised "a dangerous charm over Mrs. Graves," became current cackle in the neighbourhood. The charm was less "dangerous" in the way they suspected than the "convenience" of him was in another. In a few words, Captain Salusbury was a wealthy man, and Florence Graves had accepted the degradation of allowing another man than her husband to be her banker.

Up to the present, he had neither exacted nor won anything from her save gratitude, which, whether she felt it or not, she expressed very prettily. But Geoffrey began to "grizzle," as she called it, over the incessant intercourse which existed whenever he was in the neighbourhood, between Florence and Salusbury. The "grizzling," however, had no manner of effect upon a woman who lived so entirely for her own pleasure that the only sensation the sight of the misery of others caused her was an intense desire to get out of their way. When at last the invitation from her father came for Florence and her husband to spend three weeks or a month with him and Jane in town, Mrs. Graves would gladly have given her head—or rather Geoffrey's head—to be able to refuse it. Captain Salusbury had got leave at her pathetically-worded solicitation, and was spending it at Penarth Hall, and as Captain Salusbury had been away for about a month, she had a positive hunger for his society. This hunger grew savage when it was first mooted to her that she was to be separated from him. In vain she pleaded lassitude, that would inevitably develop into downright ill-health if she were subjected to the racket of London life. Geoffrey reminded her that she had been pining with most objectionable persistency for this racket ever since her marriage, and firmly impressed upon her that he, and not Salusbury, had the ordering of her goings, and that accordingly she was to go.

Then, for the first time, Florence's passively con-

temptuous indifference to her husband took the form of active dislike. He stood resolute and immovable in the way between herself and her pleasure. That he, who had hitherto been as malleable gold in her hands, should so block her path made her furious, and in her fury she made the fatal mistake of implying that another man already gave her more sympathy than he (Geoffrey) did, and would have been thrice as kind and indulgent were he in Geoffrey's place.

Her frivolity, her disregard of his wishes, her barely concealed indifference to him, her extravagance—all these things he had half ignored and wholly forgiven. But when she hinted heartlessly and insolently that another man loved her more, and would be kinder to her if she would let him, than the husband who was thwarting her a little, Geoffrey's heart nearly broke. He still believed her to be so pure and good that he had no fear of her falling into actual sin, but that she should suffer her thoughts to dwell on the possibility of another man loving her better, and being more tender to her than he was himself, seemed to him to sully what he supposed to be the snowy purity of her mind.

He would not degrade her by any display of jealousy after this. He would show her how absolutely her hints and implications had failed to make him distrust her. She might see as much of Captain Salusbury as she pleased ; but he was determined that she should accept her father's invitation and go to town.

CHAPTER VIII.

A FAVOURITE CHILD.

MISS HERRIES had gone home, after Mrs. Collette's disclosure, in a state of mingled misery and wrath. It seemed monstrous and incredible that a woman

who still looked so young as Helen did, and who was undeniably beautiful, should have promised to marry a man who lapsed into old age directly he discarded the garments in which he faced the world, and subsided into his dressing-gown and slippers. More than this, Jane, though inexperienced, was not a fool. She had observed a subtle something in Captain Stafford's manner to his beautiful old familiar friend, as well as in that lady's manner to him, which showed her that, whatever they might be now, those two had been infinitely dear to each other. It almost savoured of indelicacy, Jane thought, that, in the face of this evidence which they had brought against themselves, Mrs. Collette should have proclaimed her intention of marrying Jane's made-up and eminently unattractive old father.

In addition to this, Jane had already begun to taste the sweets of power. She was the mistress of an admirably appointed home, and there was no one to question whither she went or why she came. There are some natures—and these are generally the sweetest and most wholesome ones—to whom liberty once tasted becomes absolutely indispensable. The slightest attempt to put fetters of any description upon them makes them strike out against the powers that be. The thought of subsiding into the position of a mere appendage to Helen Collette, when the latter should have become the mistress of the admirably appointed home, grew intolerable to the girl as she drove home. Fortunately for the preservation of the present peace, and for the continuance of friendly relations in the future, Lord Roydmore did not see his excited daughter until they met at dinner, and then the servants were a providential restraint.

Unluckily for Lord Roydmore, they were neither going out, nor had they any guests this evening. Smelling powder in the air, he announced his intention, in rather a self-pitying and resigned way, of “reading for an hour or two quietly in his study, and going to bed early.” But he had hardly settled him-

self down in his easiest chair, with his reading-table, lamp and glass of good old port by his side, before Jane knocked at the door and came in quickly.

“Papa!” she began, and then something rose in her throat and checked further utterance for a few moments. He looked twenty years older than when he had faced her an hour before at the dinner-table. He had slipped into an old, loose morning-coat, and his feet were stuck into big, gouty-looking slippers. The carefully disposed locks of streaky grey hair were disarranged by their contact with the cushion against which his tired head reposed. The lines on his forehead were more strongly marked, the tint of his skin was sicklier than she had ever noticed it before. A strong wave of love and pity for him swept over her heart, and obliterated all the anger and contempt she had been nursing against him since hearing Mrs. Collette’s disclosure. Instead of reproaching and ridiculing him for his infatuation, as she had intended doing, his daughter fell on her knees by his side, and flung her arms round his neck.

“Papa, poor papa, are you feeling ill? Let me stay with you. Let me bring my work in and sit with you.”

He drew a long breath which lifted a weight off his heart. He had felt something like a spasm there on his daughter’s sudden entrance, for he had rightly fathomed the cause of her visit. But her abrupt relapse into tenderness reassured him. He felt better, and looked it.

“I am subject to little nervous attacks,” he explained fretfully. “Any sudden jar to my nerves, such as flinging open doors and bouncing into my room, disturbs and startles me. You must be careful to avoid doing this in future, my dear child. I am better now. No, no, you needn’t bring your work. I don’t care to watch a woman stitching.”

“I didn’t mean to bounce in, papa; and if you don’t like the work, may I come here and read? I don’t like to think you are here alone when you are

not feeling well," Jane pleaded. She felt rebuffed and humbled, and painfully anxious to make amends for that temporary derangement in her father's nervous system of which she was the cause. Her wish to please him was so evident, so genuine that he allowed his features to relax into a rewarding smile.

"You're a dear, kind-hearted girl, Jane, dear ; worth a hundred of that heartless, selfish sister of yours. I wish I had discovered it before, but she blinded and deceived her father, as she has blinded and deceived her husband. But I won't keep you here to-night, dear. The society of *quite* young people is rather exhausting, sometimes, to those who are past their first youth themselves. Good-night, my child."

He kissed her quickly, flung his head back upon the cushion of his chair with an air of relief, and resumed the reading of his newspaper in a way that made Jane understand there was to be no appeal against his dismissal of her. She rose slowly from her knees without any of that energy and vigour which had characterised her entrance, and which he had unkindly described as "bounce," and took her departure, feeling chilled and inconsequent, and with the words she had come to say unspoken still.

A few days after this little incident, the Graves came up, and Jane forgot a good deal of her anxiety about her father's fate and health in the sharp disappointment she felt about the relations between Geoffrey and Florence, and their respective attitudes towards herself.

Young Mrs. Graves was as pretty and youthful-looking as ever, but she seemed to have acquired the cynicism and bitterness of the most cynical and bitter old age. She put aside every expression of affection which Jane offered her as so much idle, worthless verbiage, and owned candidly that if all she was to get from her father was house-room and participation in their round of gaiety, she should feel no gratitude

to him for having caused her to be "dragged away from The Court."

"I am so glad you're so fond of your own home, but I should like to see that you were glad to be with me again for a little time, Flo; and papa—you were always his favourite child, you know—he must feel hurt at your not even seeming to be glad to see him," Jane said, as the two sisters were having tea in Jane's sanctum on the afternoon of Florence's arrival.

"I'm not a bit fond of my own home," Florence said calmly, nibbling at her cake. "And as for being papa's favourite child, much good his favouritism has done me. If it hadn't been for papa I should have broken off my engagement when grandpapa died, and then I should have made a decent match. As it is, I'm fast bound to a man who bores me to death, and who won't give me the chance of getting rid of him."

"Florence! how can you speak so brutally of such a dear good fellow as Geof?" Jane asked indignantly. Then she added, "But you don't mean it; I know you don't mean it?"

"Oh, wise young judge; oh, good young woman, I mean it and a great deal more. Geof's dearness and goodness consists in watching my every movement with the affectionate vigilance a cat displays towards a mouse; and his goodness consists in plodding along as monotonously as his brother pudding-headed yokels. Why should I be grateful for these things?"

"Geof is altered, Florence; he doesn't look happy."

Florence crimsoned angrily.

"There you go, croak, croak, croak, just like his mother and sisters. I can't help his looking heavy and stupid. Perhaps he eats and sleeps too much, and suffers from torpid liver. If he would work his brain more, and talk a little more, and stir himself up to catch on to things that interest other people, he would look more like a man of the day, and less like

a stalled ox. Whatever made me weak enough to let myself be driven into tying myself up to a man who hasn't an idea beyond the bounds of his own property, and the birds, beasts and fishes that reside upon it, I can't tell. Oh, by the way, I want a card for your ball for a friend of mine."

"Is it for Captain Stafford?" Jane asked, her eyelids drooping before her sisters steady stare; "because if it is, we have sent him one. I know him slightly, and he told me he had been staying with Geoffrey and you."

"It's not for Captain Stafford; and may I ask what that gentleman said about me? Not that I care for his opinion very much, only while we were in Paris he gave me the impression that he was ready to lay down his life for me, and when he came to The Court he seemed to have altered his mind. He's not quite the type of man I like, but he would do very well for you, Jane, if you can persuade his eminence to step off his pedestal and look at the sister of such an unworthy being as myself."

"I don't like your jokes; I see nothing to laugh at. I think it's coarse of you to suggest that I am trying to get a man to marry me (for that's what you mean) simply because I said I knew him slightly."

Florence shrugged her shoulders contemptuously.

"If you put up your back and buck every time I offer you advice, you'll throw me off, and I shall never offer you any more. Now, as you're so touchy, we will cease to speak about your interesting self, and you shall tell me a little about papa. Is there any truth in this rumour that he wants to marry Mrs. Collette, the handsome widow?"

Jane nodded her head in assent.

"I suppose it is true," she said. "Mrs. Collette told me so herself."

"I see breakers ahead," Florence cried delightedly; "why, she's Harry Stafford's woman!"

"Florence!" Jane interrupted imperiously, "if papa knew that you spoke to me like that; if he knew

you could speak in that way at all, he wouldn't let you stay here."

"Then he shall know it without much further delay," Florence laughed pleasantly. "You little goose! *what* a goose you are still, Jane. This time I meant no harm, though. I only meant that any time during the last five years Helen Collette could have married Captain Stafford, with whom she is very much in love, if she had liked."

"Then as she has not married him, he has not been in love with her, I suppose," Jane said, with a transparent effort at indifference.

"Oh, yes, he has been and is in what men of his calibre call love. She interests, amuses and excites him. She always makes up especially well when he is likely either to see or to hear about her. Men like to hear the woman they're spoken about with admired, you know, and she never asks him to own up about anything that they say of him, when he's away from her. She has the art of holding him on, in fact, and she has held him on for five years."

For no reason that she could assign to herself, Jane felt inexpressibly offended. She had no right and no reason to think that Captain Stafford was made of fine porcelain, and Mrs. Collette of effective pottery merely; nevertheless, the notion that there was this distinction between them socially had got into her head. In her secret heart she felt there would be less incongruity in a marriage between her father and Mrs. Collette than in one between Mrs. Collette and Captain Stafford.

"After all, why should papa not marry to please himself?" she said aloud, following out her own train of thought.

Florence stamped her foot, and caught one corner of her pretty lip in with a pearly tooth. In the old Bath days, when Jane had annoyed her to this extent, she had been wont to show her displeasure by slapping Jane's face. But she curbed her inclination to do so on this occasion by a timely recollection of a cer-

tain favour she would require at Jane's hands in the course of a few days.

"There is this reason why papa should not marry, either to please himself or to please Mrs. Collette. He might have a second family, and as he would be in his dotage by the time their mother could make them interesting to him, he would probably be wheedled into leaving some, if not most, of his money away from us to them. No ; he must be stopped from the commission of such a folly. *I* will undertake to either force or persuade Mrs. Collette to give him up."

Though at the first blush of the matter Jane had been to the full as averse to the prospect of having Helen Collette for a stepmother as Florence was now showing herself to be, she (Jane) revolted now at the arbitrary and domineering way in which her sister spoke. Lord Roydmere had always petted, indulged and gratified Florence to the utmost of his power, but no thought of his happiness or comfort swayed her now, when she was resolving upon a course that she knew would be contrary to his will. It was not of his honour or happiness that she was thinking.

It was solely of that money which he would have to leave, and which she was already greedily grasping in imagination.

"Interference will come very badly from you, Florence. After all, you are not nearly as much concerned as I am, and if I raise no objection to Mrs. Collette, you're bound to accept her civilly."

Florence laughed.

"My dear child," she said, "you make a very praiseworthy effort to assert yourself against me, but you can't do it, Jane, you can't do it. The habit of my authority over you is strong upon you still. You always were very fond of me, you know, dear, and you will be guided by me now. *Let me alone!* it will be better for you in the end."

She spoke very suavely and sweetly, and put her hand caressingly and gently on Jane's as she spoke. The latter was puzzled, partially subjugated, but not convinced.

“When you are loving to me, I would do anything in the world for you, Flo ; at least almost anything.”

“That’s right, dear ; that’s how it ought to be between sisters. I know you again now. You’re my own affectionate goose of a Jane. I didn’t know the aggressive young woman who defied me just now.”

It occurred to Jane that the sooner she left off being an affectionate goose the better it would be for her. But as she had no desire to upset the present harmonious relations between herself and Florence, she kept this reflection to herself.

To Geoffrey Graves’ surprise, his wife was at her very best this night in the little family—deferentially attentive and loving to her father, prettily submissive and affectionate to himself, and apparently devoted in a tenderly protecting way to Jane. When they had all reassembled in the drawing-room (though her soul was eaten out with the weariness of this family party), she placed herself on a stool at her father’s feet in the old girlish way, and proceeded to cajole him by what even Geoffrey, who knew her pretty well by this time, took for a display of real filial tenderness and jealous desire to keep as much of his love to herself as possible.

“Dear papa !” she murmured, “it is so good to be back with you again. It is so good to know that you don’t care a bit for any one else in the world, excepting Jack and Jane and me, in spite of what horrid people say.”

Lord Roydmore fidgeted under this monopolising and enthralling address, and replied to it rather hesitatingly,—

“My dear Florence, a man can’t expect to absorb his children’s hearts any more than he can their time. You, for instance, have closer and dearer claims upon you than I can make. Jane and Jack may follow your example any day. I am not a selfish father. I do not desire that you should waste your young lives entirely upon your poor old father.”

Florence put her lips to his hand, and held that member tight as she said,—

“If people could see how happy we are together, they wouldn’t say such horrid things to me as they have been saying lately.”

Lord Roydmore was slightly troubled with a cough. When the cough had passed, he said,—

“People are apt to say horrid things about all of us. I think we should all do well to avoid listening to rumours, especially when they are slanderous.”

He was thinking of the rumours that were current respecting Florence herself at the moment. But that adroit young swordswoman took his weapon and turned it against himself.

“I haven’t been able to avoid hearing, but I have declined to believe the slanderous rumours, papa. They were not nice, not at all nice; at the same time, they were too ridiculous. Fancy people getting up the report that you were thinking of marrying, actually *marrying*, Mrs. Collette, Captain Stafford’s Mrs. Collette——”

“Florence! you are more than deceitful; you never heard the rumour till I told you of it myself this afternoon, told you of it as a fact,” Jane struck in tempestuously; “you are insulting and cruel——”

She paused, panic-stricken, in the midst of her reproachful torrent of words. Lord Roydmore had snatched his hand from his favourite child, and was lying back, looking faint and white, against his cushioned chair. The words, “Captain Stafford’s Mrs. Collette,” had stuck a knife into his heart, and that heart was pitifully weak.

CHAPTER VIII.

"SEND FOR JACK."

SINCE the day when the parable of the carnations had been spoken to him Captain Stafford had seen nothing of Helen Collette. She was another man's property now, and he would not share the delights of private unfettered intercourse with her with any man.

The report of the engagement between the beautiful widow and "old Roydmore" spread rapidly through certain circles, but not in that in which the Wyndhams revolved. Down in their beautiful home at Redhill, the old bachelor brother and maiden sister were out of reach of the echoes even of the gossip which spread like flames on a dry prairie in the circles within circles of fashionable and smart society. As usual, they went up to town to see her two or three times a week, and as usual her nice, frank, womanly letters were found reposing with equal frequency on Mr. Wyndham's breakfast-table.

Time after time, as these letters, breathing a touching and beautiful spirit of grateful affection and reliance on him, were opened and read by Mr. Wyndham, did the good, generous-hearted, humble-minded old man resolve to put his fate to the touch, and relieve the dear, financially-harassed woman, to whom he was so devotedly and honourably attached, from her monetary difficulties. Being guileless as a child, he had long ago taken his sister into his confidence concerning the hopes, fears, wishes, aspirations and doubts which he entertained about Helen Collette. Unlike the majority of only sisters of an only brother, the joyous-natured old maiden lady thought Helen "good enough even for brother Ralph." She en-

dowed Mrs. Collette, in fact, with an extraordinary number of excellent qualities of which that lady did not even know as much as their names.

"Helen has such a fund of delicate pride," she would say affectionately, when he would read her a passage from one of Mrs. Collette's letters, in which that lady would pathetically entreat him *not* to overburden her soul with gratitude by sending her any more cheques, which, in spite of her dire need, she could not bring herself to accept.

"Helen has such a fund of delicate pride, Ralph. I see things as quickly as most people, and I know that in her case there is no feigned reluctance to accept the kindnesses you show her. No, no; everything about our dear Helen is *real*, thank God, and the sooner she is our Helen in very truth the better I shall be pleased."

To these remarks of his sister, made in the best of all good faith, Mr. Wyndham would reply like the true-hearted gentleman he was,—

"I will never trade on her gratitude, Dorothy. Our Helen has a noble nature, which might lead her to reward me too generously for the little I have been able to do for her. I must protect her against her own grateful impulses. I must never dare to ask her to crown my life with joy and glory by becoming my wife, while there is a chance of a better man than myself winning her."

"But there is no 'better man' than yourself in the case, Ralph. Helen, though she mixes freely with the gay world, is untouched, I am sure, by the fulsome flatteries which those men of the world who do not understand her innate worth pour forth upon her. My dear brother, I would never counsel you to seek mere beauty and grace in the woman you would make your wife. Helen has these gifts which appeal to those who see what is on the surface only, but she has other and higher gifts."

"'A perfect woman, nobly planned,'" Mr. Wyndham quoted, with tears in his light grey protruding

eyes. "Dorothy, I have always tried to live a life upon which I shall not be ashamed to look back when my time comes. But if God gives me this good gift, if I am ever blessed enough to be the one to whom Helen will entrust the charge of her most pure and precious life, no one will feel how unworthy I am of such honour more keenly than I shall myself."

"You think too lowly of yourself, but you can't think too highly of Helen," old Dorothy Wyndham said, blinking away tears for which she could assign no cause for shedding, even to herself. "Helen is heart-free, Ralph, and I know that the sentiment of gratitude which she entertains towards you, for what she herself calls your 'unceasing, unresting' kindness, is stronger than the 'love' most women give the men they marry. My dear brother, you are too modest! Why shouldn't a woman like our Helen, who disregards externals, and can judge character, love you for yourself? You are in the prime of life" (Mr. Wyndham winced), "you are good and honourable, and kind and generous. You were the best son, and are the best brother that ever lived. Helen will be a happy, as well as a lucky woman, when you ask her to be your wife, and she will make you as happy a man as you deserve to be."

He sat overwhelmed and abashed by this torrent of sisterly eloquence. The arguments were the outcome of partial affection, he knew; nevertheless, he could not help being more than slightly swayed by them. Without having the faintest touch of the Pharisee about him, he knew that he was a good man. A good, moral, God-fearing, law-abiding, neighbour-loving, Christian gentleman. At the same time, he half feared and half suspected that these were not the qualities which win the hearts of women, especially of such a woman as Helen Collette. As he sat there blushing, glowing with smiles, and slightly trembling with pleased nervous embarrassment caused by his sister's hearty tribute, he caught sight of himself in the merciless looking-glass opposite. The vision might have

been one of sin, so terribly did it shock him. All his thoughts a moment before had been of Helen. He had conjured up a picture of her beautiful face, of her grand, gracious form, of her winning eyes, and her easy, graceful movements. He had been gloating wildly over this vision, thinking what an earthly Paradise the presence of it would make his home. And now this vision was rudely dispelled by the sight of himself in the glass.

He did not blench nor blink nor turn away from the reflection. He sat still gazing at it fixedly, pitying it for being so round and rosy, so inclined to double-chin, pendulous cheek, and hairlessness on the top of its head. He did not even cease munching the toast he had just bitten off, though the movement of his jaws was distinctly aged.

"Dorothy," he said presently, "come here, my dear, and stand by me."

She obeyed him wonderingly.

"We are a well-matched pair, Dorothy, a nice comfortable-looking old couple. Looking at ourselves together in that faithful friend (he pointed to the glass), there is nothing jarring, nothing incongruous in the picture."

"Certainly nothing, Ralph. We were always considered alike."

He took her hand and patted it as it lay upon his shoulder.

"But if a handsome smart man, young enough to be your son, sat where I am, and the picture represented husband and wife, there would be something jarring and incongruous in it then."

"A smart, young, handsome man *my* husband? My *dear* Ralph, the very idea is shocking, shocking," Miss Dorothy said hastily, bustling back to her seat as she spoke.

"It would be equally shocking if things were reversed, and I sat here with Helen by my side as my wife. No, Dorothy, my dream of folly is over. That

true friend yonder has shown me the truth too plainly. Helen shall be our daughter."

Miss Wyndham sat thoughtfully silent for a minute or two. All her pride as well as all her love, had been invested in her brother from the days of her earliest childhood. She had never seen either girl or woman whom she considered good enough for him until she met with and fell under Helen's sway. Then she succumbed to the charm of a woman who had the rare gift of interesting herself in and making herself interesting to other women. Helen's troubles and successes, Helen's social aches and pains, were all freely and frankly confided to the sympathetic ear of dear old Dorothy Wyndham, in a way that made the latter pick up Helen's burdens and try to bear the whole weight of them upon her own plump round-about shoulders.

In all her life, old Miss Wyndham had never either told a lie or feigned a feeling. If she neither liked nor approved of people, she held her tongue, and also held aloof from them. But if ever any one became the recipient of her love and trust, she became the most doggedly obtused of partisans, the most blindly confiding of friends. Helen Collette had detected this special trait in Dorothy's character the first time she met her. The rest was easy.

It was very hard for the dear old lady to hear her brother renounce that glorious prospect of matrimonial bliss which she had chalked out for him. In her eyes he was still a "well-looking young man, with a beautiful expression." Though she shrank with genuine modest horror from the suggestion of the possibility of her ever wronging youth by allying herself with it, she felt no such shrinking where her brother was concerned. Helen, in her eyes, was as perfect as a woman can be, or needs to be. And Helen was "good enough for Ralph," that was all.

"You think too much of mere externals, and you under-estimate yourself, Ralph," she said at last. Then, as he only shook his head rather sadly in reply,

she tried to change the current of his thoughts by going to the window and calling to the peacocks.

It was such a beautiful scene that lay stretched out before her. The sloping sweep of velvet lawn was bordered by grand old elms and oaks, perfumed lindens, weeping ashes, copper beeches and two or three dark stalwart fir trees standing stiff and stark, like sentinels among their less severe brethren. A little apart from the rest, on the left, a mighty cedar stood alone. A cedar that had many a tale to tell, could it but have spoken, for under its broad sweeping branches the Canterbury pilgrims had rested to take their needful rest and temperate fare.

Above the tree tops, the waving line of Surrey hills in the blue far distance shut out the sights and sounds of the world beyond in that direction in the pleasantest manner possible. At her feet the peacocks perked themselves, stepping backwards and forward mincingly to a measure of their own. A cat, whose long grey silky hair was an inheritance from a remote Persian ancestress, had coiled itself up becomingly on a crimson, velvet-cushioned chair under the verandah. A stately, golden-yellow greyhound watched the peacocks with jealous disdain as they became the recipients of several tit-bits from the breakfast table. A couple of gardeners were rolling a lawn that already resembled a billiard table. It was all so very beautiful that "it ought to have a mistress in keeping with it," old Miss Wyndham thought half hopefully, as she recalled Helen's always encouraging manner to "dear old Ralph," half-regretfully as poor old Ralph's hesitation and self-depreciation rose vividly to her mind.

"Things must take their course, I know," she said to herself resignedly, as she finished her morning pastime of feeding the peacocks; "but as either sister or daughter, Helen will always find a home here in my heart."

For two or three days after that happy evening spent in the bosom of his family, with his favourite

child at his knee, Lord Roydmore had been ailing. That was the word his old soldier servant, who had clung to him from the time he left the service all through the poverty-nipped days at Bath, up to the comparatively brilliant present, used in describing his master's symptoms. "His Lordship was ailing. Not ill, no, certainly, miss, not ill," (this in answer to Jane's anxious inquiries), "but ailing and wanting rest. Perhaps Mrs. Graves being so lively, would be kind enough not to disturb him."

"Papa must be very ill if he doesn't want to be disturbed by Mrs. Graves, Long? If he said I was to keep out of the room, I could understand it. Papa never did much care about seeing me——"

"His Lordship wants you now, Miss, now as soon as you go to him, without Mrs. Graves," the old iron-bound soldier with the soft heart cut in tremulously. Long had never loved his master's eldest daughter, even in the days of her unfledged arrogance and pettifogging power at Bath. He had disliked her for the way in which she had stinted the little household in order that she might appropriate some of the housekeeping money to her own private needs. He had disliked her for the light-hearted way in which she had given endless trouble to himself, and every one else whom she could command, without ever thinking it worth her while to offer them a word of thanks. But above all, he had disliked her for the way in which she had kicked her sister Jane into the hindmost place and kept her there with a strong hand, while she had turned a smiling, wheedling false face to her father. Long knew Miss Florence to the very marrow of her delicately shaped small bones, and liked her as little as it was possible for a man to do under the circumstances. "She had always been a sly 'un," he told himself, "and now she was a bad 'un into the bargain," he believed, for the rumours which had reached her father respecting her gambling and other propensities had filtered through to Long's ears also. There was righteous wrath in the old servant's heart

against this daughter of his master's, who was, he truly believed bringing her father's sparse grey locks with sorrow to the grave. Accordingly, he now felt a double pleasure in summoning Jane to her father's sick room—the pleasure of exalting Miss Herries and of abasing Mrs. Graves.

Lord Roydmore was lying on a sofa in his dressing-gown when his daughter went to him. He had just completed his invalid toilette, and Jane felt a sensation of repulsion, not to him—not to her father—but to that darkly-dyed hair and that faint touch of something that was distinctly not the hue of his own blood showing on his worn, wan cheek. He was wrapped up in a golden-brown velvet dressing-gown, with a girdle round his waist, and the blinds were lowered to a degree that made it impossible for him to see to read in the room. The secret why these preparations had been made oozed out presently. After looking nervously behind her in order to make quite sure that Florence was not secreted somewhere in the folds of Jane's tea-gown, he began :

“I want to send you on rather a delicate mission, my child ; I want you to go and fetch Mrs. Collette, and bring her to see me without Florence knowing anything about it. I have not been able to write for several days, and I have not been able to spare Long to go with a message. Helen will be anxious. You must go and bring her to see me. Long and you are the only ones I can trust.”

He looked so appallingly haggard and ill as he spoke, that even if Jane had hardened her heart against Mrs. Collette previously, she would have relented on hearing his appeal made with such quivering lips, backed by imploring glances from such hollow eyes.

“I will go at once, papa,” she said, kissing his clammy brow with her fresh warm young lips ; “I will bring her here, and—” she paused for an instant, threw her head up, and added quietly, “Florence will not dare to interfere, even if she sees Mrs. Collette.”

“I would rather they did not meet; I would rather avoid a row,” he said fretfully. “You don’t seem to understand! I am below par, consequently shaky. It is not that I should permit any interference from Florence, but I want to avoid anything like a scene. Now go, my dear; you are wasting time; bring Helen here without delay. She must have been very anxious.”

He had raised himself upon his elbow while he had been speaking, and now he lay back, panting and pallid even under that tinge of false bloom on his face. Jane shuddered as she turned away; a premonition of something dreadful being about to happen, something for which they all, every one of them, were unprepared, assailed her. At the door she turned to look at him, and he beckoned her back.

“I want your brother; send for Jack. I want to introduce him to Helen—to his future mother,” he whispered, and she assented to his request, as she would have assented now if he had asked for the moon or a baby’s rattle.

For three or four days, Mrs. Collette had neither heard nor seen anything of the man whom she was pledged to marry, and though personally he had grown distasteful to her, it would have been unnatural if she had not experienced a few qualms of anxiety on the subject. She knew that his masterful married daughter had come up to stay with him, and by intuition she knew that this married daughter was in opposition to her for other reasons than those connected with Lord Roydmore. In the world in which Captain Stafford lived, his long-drawn-out infatuation for Helen Collette was an old tale oftold. It was more than likely that pretty Florence Graves had heard of it, and rumour said once upon a time pretty Florence Graves had tried every art she knew to gain the empire over his heart. Putting these things together, Mrs. Collette felt she was not very far out in assuming that if Florence could give her

(Helen) a fall with Lord Roydmore, she would do so.

While still in perplexity and doubt, and before Jane came on her mission, Mr. Wyndham called with a petition that still further complicated the tangled skein of Helen's life.

CHAPTER IX.

“YOU HAVE COME TO ME, MY OWN!”

UNCERTAINTY and perplexity, indignation at being interfered with antagonistically in the matter of her marriage by the same woman who had once dared to attempt to annex her lover, were in absolute dominion over Helen's mind that day, when Mr. Wyndham appeared, oddly enough without his sister!

Helen was so accustomed to see the cosy, genial old pair trotting in together, that for a moment she experienced a shock as the thought crossed her mind that Miss Dorothy must be dead! Old Ralph's face looked preternaturally grave. Altogether, the signs of sorrow about him were sufficiently strong to startle Helen into saying,—

“What is the matter? Where is Miss Dorothy?”

“Dorothy is well, quite well, my dear; she sends her best love to you, and hopes——”

He paused, struggled with a little throat difficulty, and then, with the gloom deepening on his face as he remembered how old and fat he was, he went on,—

“Dorothy sends you this little note, my dear, and a ring that belonged to our mother, and that is consequently of priceless worth to us.”

Helen took the note and ring with one of the sweetest looks of gratitude of which her well-fringed, soft fathomless grey eyes were capable. Until she had the ring on her finger, and was reading the note, it did not occur to Mr. Wyndham that he had been specially instructed not to give her either until he had won her consent to be his wife.

For it had come to this, that his sister's persuasions, joined to his own inclinations, had overcome his scruples against uniting his December to her ripe, warm, beautiful July, and to-day, though he feared his fate terribly, he had come to put it to the touch.

Helen read through the note rapidly, calmly, and with the most complete comprehension of its meaning. It hailed her as sister, it laid all authority over all things beautiful down at their Redhill home at her feet. It thanked her with touching gratitude for bringing such joy into the life of the writer's dear brother. In fact, altogether, it put another very strong string on to Helen's bow.

"I gave you that note too soon," he said tremulously, when she had read it, and sat with downcast face twiddling the ring round her finger.

Silence was safer than speech! Helen took the safer part.

"You are shocked, outraged at my presumption, and no wonder!" he went on, with miserable humility; "forgive me, my child, it was the desire of the moth for the star; but I'm such an old moth that I ought to have known better. Forgive me!"

Helen's mind had glanced like lightning through all the possibilities of her own case. Truly she was engaged to marry Lord Roydmore, and truly did she yearn to occupy the position Lord Roydmore could give her. But for several days—days that in the gallop of London life seemed to place an immeasurable period of time between them—she had heard nothing from her hitherto attentive and impassioned swain. In fighting her way to the front, Helen had received many a hard knock, many a bad bruise. What wonder that she longed for the visible rewards of her distinguished service in her own cause?—what wonder that she was ready to sail into any port out of the storm?

Her mind glanced like lightning through all the possibilities of the case. She was between two stools. Lord Roydmore might fail her, was failing her ac-

according to all outward seeming, under family pressure. This true, solid, old mass of flesh and sincerity would feel himself honoured if she took him as a forlorn hope, and would never reproach her for her inability to give him more than the merest gratitude for all that he lavished upon her.

"I have nothing to forgive, and what you are pleased to call the star shall give the moth its desire," she was saying. Her hands were in his, his good old hairless lips were pressing hers, when the door opened injudiciously for once, and Jane Herries came in, straight and swift as an arrow, with the words,—

"Dear Mrs. Collette, papa wants you at once; he is ill, *so* ill he has sent for Jack. He wants us all to recognise and receive you as our future mother."

Jane had been preparing a dozen neat little speeches on her way over, but this one came from her heart, and was unrehearsed. That it was effectively delivered there can be little doubt, judging from the almost stunning effect it produced upon the thrilled though limited audience.

As the last words flew from her lips, Jane realised that in sincere unconsciousness she had exposed a woman who was cruelly deceiving not only her (Jane's) father, but also the honest-looking old gentleman who was looking as much ashamed of himself as if he, and not Helen, were guilty of trickery and perfidy. Anything that savoured ever so slightly of underhandedness and double-dealing was repugnant to the girl. But she was largely endowed with that rare spirit of loyalty to her own sex which makes a woman shrink from being the instrument of humiliating torture to another woman. Inexperienced as she was in worldly love and intrigue, her generous nature stood Helen Collette in better stead in this emergency than any case-hardened old feminine diplomat could have done.

"You will spare Mrs. Collette to come and see poor papa now he is so ill, won't you?" she said, with pretty courtesy, to poor, hot, embarrassed Mr. Wyndham. "She has been so kind to me that we

look upon her as one of us ; don't we ?" she added reassuringly to Helen, and under cover of these words of tact Helen managed to get out of the room.

Of course it was wrong of her to have tacitly accepted Mr. Wyndham's offer while she was distinctly pledged to marry Lord Roydmore. But she had a strong instinct that from some cause or other—what she could not determine, for the atmosphere of the last few days had been full of uncertainty—Lord Roydmore was slipping from her. Her battle with life had been a hard one. Fair as appearances were around her, they were maintained at the cost of unceasing management and *finesse*. The cheques that fell in now and again from the lavish hands of the Wyndhams did not cover the expenditure which Helen, as a beauty and a society woman, felt not only entitled to, but bound to devote to her pretty and popular self. Sometimes, when she was lying awake at night, her innumerable bills would dance about like a hideous phantasmagoria, and she would feel as if she were in a lost battle, borne down by the flying. After such nights as these, the necessity for an immediate marriage with some man—any man—who could put her upon the solid golden pedestal of a good substantial income would be very much impressed upon her. Such nights as these had been frequent of late. It was with a natural feeling of elation that she reflected, while dressing for her visit to Lord Roydmore, that she had definitely accepted the other old man, and could hold him fast.

There was a momentary difficulty about saying good-bye to him. It was impossible to take a properly effective binding farewell of him before Jane ; at least, if not impossible, it would be sadly indiscreet. The difficulty was but a momentary one, though. Helen was a woman of resource, one who seldom allowed herself to be baffled. She had no little boudoir to which to summon her ancient but ardent swain, but the dining-room would answer the purpose of my lady's bower for once.

She opened the drawing-room door and stood in the entrance, looking superbly handsome, and as cool as if she had not been caught by the daughter of one man to whom she was engaged, in the act of kissing another.

"My dining-room clock has stopped, Mr. Wyndham; you are the only person who sets all its machinery going properly, will you come and wind it up for me? I will not detain you more than a minute, Jane," she added, turning with a winning air of affectionate familiarity towards the young lady who might possibly become her step-daughter.

"Papa will be impatient; he always is when he doesn't feel well, and then he will scold me," Jane protested, but Helen had piloted Mr. Wyndham out of the room by this time, and Jane's remonstrance fell upon space, and failed to enlighten Mr. Wyndham as to the real relations which existed between his Helen and Lord Roydmore.

Back ages ago, in his long past, almost forgotten youth, Ralph Wyndham had had a romance. It had been a very brief and commonplace one, but it had left its mark upon him for years. He had been engaged to an innocent-looking little country-town girl, who had jilted him and married the riding-master whom Ralph had engaged to teach her to sit upon the horse which he (Ralph) had given her. Her deception had not soured him, but it had hurt him horribly. It had, so to say, taken his taste for women out of him for many a long year. But Helen had restored his long-lost faith to him, and he worshipped her with an idolatry that few, if any, of the younger men who buzzed about her had ever felt.

It was a plain, a very plain, podgy little body, but a real big chivalrous soul dwelt within it. When she had swept and shuffled him into the dining-room, she shut the door smartly and began,—

"Don't bother about the clock; that is all right, I only wanted to give you the chance of saying good-bye to me properly, Ralph, and to tell you that you

must not publish our engagement till I see you again."

He stood on tiptoe and kissed her, then called her the "Queen of his life," and promised to abide by her decision in all things, even to the extent of his not proclaiming his triumph until she gave him permission to do so.

"Excepting to Dorothy. You will let me tell Dorothy to-night? It will make her so happy."

"No, no, no. Dorothy shall be the first to hear it, of course, but not even Dorothy must hear it to-night. I am more romantic than you think, Ralph. I want to have the knowledge confined to just ourselves for a little while. It's so sweet to know that you are mine and I am yours, and that no one so much as suspects it yet."

He swallowed the sugared pill at a gulp, but he did not like it.

"I am so proud, so happy, so blessed, that I want every one who knows me to know it," he said humbly.

"My dear Ralph, most people who know you will think you are doing a very foolish thing in taking an extravagant, penniless woman to wife. Come back now and say good-bye with composure to Miss Herries. Don't look at me any more. You give yourself and me away too painfully when you permit yourself to gaze."

"You have taken off the ring!" he said reproachfully.

"Of course I have! a big, blazing diamond like that would attract every one's attention, and tell the story far too lucidly."

"That is Dorothy's gift——" he was beginning.

"Then I will wear it at once," she interrupted.

"My ring, the symbol of our plighted troth, must be made for you expressly," he called out after her, as she flew up the stairs to get Dorothy's gift. Unintentionally he raised his voice, and Jane Herries heard him as she sat in the silent drawing-room,

struggling with her own impatience and with a sense of being *de trop*.

"Poor, silly old man!" the girl thought contemptuously? but there was not much wrath in her heart against Helen. Jane was too young to feel any sympathy with the loves and woes, the joys and pains of besotted age; even though her own father was one of the bamboozled victims. It struck her that they were both silly old men to allow themselves to be so befooled by a woman. But she pardoned much in the woman who had either resigned the task, or failed in it, of victimising Harry Stafford.

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There was an air of suppressed emotional excitement about the house when Jane returned to it, accompanied by Mrs. Collette. Jack, the son and heir, had arrived, and had been so seriously alarmed by his father's condition that he had sent for the doctor at once. They were waiting for the verdict now, and even Florence was temporarily subdued by her brother's evident anxiety about their father. She had told Jack everything she knew, and much that she imagined, concerning Mrs. Collette, and had been a good deal disgusted by the unconcern with which he had listened to her statements.

"Engaged to Mrs Collette, is he? Poor, dear old dad, I'm afraid he's in a bad way, Flo. I'm glad Jane is gone for the widow; he will be happier when he has seen her. Ripping handsome woman she is, too; but I thought she was booked for Stafford, the V. C. man."

"She is a horrid, intriguing woman," Florence said loftily, in reply to this. "As to her being handsome, she may have been so once, but she's ever so old."

"Do you know her?"

"No; but I have heard of her from several people, Captain Stafford himself among the number; she is padded and painted and powdered——"

“ I’m sure Stafford never told you that ; he’s not a fellow to give away a woman he has really liked,” Jack was saying as Helen came in, and they were unable to discuss her any more.

She looked rather sorrowful and very pathetically sweet as Jack greeted her gravely, and she was introduced to Mr. and Mrs. Graves. Her manner was so unpretentious, so unexacting, so fraught with sympathy for the children who were in anxiety about their parent, so charged with readiness to put herself in the background, that they could literally find no fault in her. When at last the doctor sent for Jack, and told him that Lord Roydmore had been suffering from a heart attack, but had now completely rallied and was out of danger for a time, Helen volunteered in the prettiest way imaginable to resign the pleasure of seeing her old friend rather than run the risk of disturbing or exciting him. But a peremptory message brought by Long immediately afterwards altered the aspect of things.

“ His Lordship desired Mrs. Collette and the whole family to come to him at once.”

For once Helen Collette was taken unawares, and was unprepared for what was to follow. Jack, the most important member of the Herries family (after Lord Roydmore), had received and treated her with a kindly, respectful attention that showed her he knew the terms on which she stood with his father. Her engagement was an open secret, in fact, but when she walked into the sick-room she had no idea as to whether she would stand to and fulfil it, or extricate herself by a free confession of her relations with wealthy, liberal old Mr. Wyndham.

She was not given time to determine her own line of action. Lord Roydmore, propped up by pillows, and with a flush not of health but of fictitious excitement and drug-given strength on his face, stretched his shaking hands out eagerly to her the moment his eyes rested on her well-borne, well-developed figure and witching face.

“My own, you have come to me,” he said, with ardour that contrasted painfully with his old, worn-out, shattered appearance. “Jack, Florence, Jane, my dear, dear children, this lady is my promised wife, and—my time is short, I feel it—I have the special licence here, and the vicar of this parish will be here in ten minutes to make us two *one* for the remainder of my sojourn upon earth.”

He fell back, relinquishing her hand, falling away with pathetic weakness among his pillows as he spoke, and Helen made up her mind at once. It was obvious that he was dying. She would gratify his last whim, marry him, and make his last moments happy. Mr. Wyndham could never blame her for such a womanly, philanthropic action. So, in spite of the doctor’s declaration that the excitement would hasten the inevitable end, married they were when the vicar came, and it was to Lady Roydmore that the household deferred from that moment.

CHAPTER X.

“ I TOLD YOU I WAS GOING.”

MR. WYNDHAM’S placid, composed, wealth-endowed life had been a very happy one. Up to the time of his knowing Helen Collette, he had never known what it was to have an ungratified desire. It must be understood that all his desires were innocent and honourable. He was not a good man in spite of temptation. He was good because he had never been assailed by temptation in any evil form. When he felt his strong friendship for the beautiful widow was merging into love for her, he had taken himself to task severely, calling himself “an old fool, who deserved to suffer every pang that unrequited love can inflict, because of his folly.” But when, against

his sober judgment, he had asked for and obtained the desire of his heart, then, indeed, did he feel that Fate had made him her favourite, and bestowed her choicest favours upon him. Life was very sweet to the true, trustful old man as he went back to Redhill that day, with the proud knowledge in his heart that the star of his existence had given her sweet, womanly word that henceforth she would shine for him alone.

His sister Dorothy was waiting for him under the verandah when he drove up to the house, and before either of them could speak, their eyes met, and they told and understood the whole story.

"It has been the wish of my life to see you happy with a wife, Ralph; I see I am to have that wish gratified," she said, as he stepped down by her side, tucked his hand under her arm, and led her into the house.

"My dear sister, I am too blessed, too happy——"

He almost sobbed the words out, and she patted his hand soothingly, as she had often done in their youth, when he had come to her with some brief, boyish sorrow.

"I felt so sure that it would turn out as I prayed it might, that I have been to look at a house in Reigate, to which I shall retire when you bring your bride home, dear Ralph."

"You will live with us, surely? Helen will wish it."

"No, no; the picture will be a prettier one without me; but I shall see you both every day, I feel sure of that. Was she pleased with my ring?"

"More than pleased, and she expressed what she felt so sweetly. Dorothy, God is more than good to me in giving me such a woman as Helen——"

"Don't undervalue yourself, Ralph. I appreciate our dear Helen as fully as you do, but she gains much in gaining you, and she is so noble that she will admit it, and take pride in it."

"You must go up and see her to-morrow; we will get up early, and take her out for a drive in the

country. When I left her just now, she was going to a house of mourning, I fear. Miss Herries came for her, as they were in distress about a sudden illness with which Lord Roydmore was seized. It was very sweet to me to see the way in which that girl turned to my Helen in her trouble. It was very hard to have to part with her the minute after she had given herself to me, but Helen is not the woman to let pleasure interfere with duty for a single moment, and she felt it her duty to go and comfort her suffering friends."

"Are they such friends? I was not aware of that, Ralph. Have you ever met Lord Roydmore, or any of his family, at Helen's house?"

"Unfortunately, no; I have always just missed him, for which I have been very sorry, as Helen has almost filial affection for the poor hypochondriacal gentleman, whom she knew many years ago, when she was a mere child. She is evidently fond of the daughter, the Honourable Jane. A beautiful girl Jane Herries is, by the way, really a beautiful girl. I think Helen would like to make up a match between that handsome soldier fellow, Captain Stafford, and Miss Herries."

"Is any time fixed for your wedding, Ralph?"

He blushed like a boy as he answered,—

"Nothing is settled excepting the great fact that she is to be my wife. What I shall propose to-morrow is that we marry in about a month—that will give her time to get her trousseau, you know—and go abroad while this house is being put in order and refurnished."

"Refurnished?"

"Certainly; to a great extent, that is, the drawing and dining rooms, and her own apartments must be furnished according to her taste entirely."

"Then the refurnishing shall be *my* wedding present to Helen," the generous old sister said heartily. "I feel I can't do enough for the woman who has brought such joy, such pure, noble joy into your life, Ralph."

They were off to town betimes the next day, laden with the choicest fruits from hot-houses and vineries, and the rarest flowers from the conservatories. The arrangement the head gardener had made of a huge group of the palest yellow roses—so pale that they seemed half-fainting with delight at their own sweetness—did not please Mr. Wyndham's taste this day.

"That high-handled basket is all very well for ordinary occasions," he said to Dorothy, tenderly poking his fat old finger, which was trembling with happiness, in among the flowers. "We must stop at Storr & Mortimer's, where I am having her ring made, and get a silver bowl to hold the roses. I heard Helen say once that a silver bowl was the only worthy receptacle for yellow roses of this tint."

So the silver bowl, big enough for an infant's bath, was got, and the roses were transferred into it from the graceful, despised basket. Then the old brother and sister, who still took a childish delight in lavishing rich gifts upon those they loved, went on in a flutter of happy expectation to the home of the well-appreciated betrothed.

There was a sense of quiet, almost an air of chill, about the interior, when, the door being opened at length by a servant, who looked aggrievedly unprepared for such early callers, they stepped into the hall. Helen was not a quiet woman, as a rule. Her clear, cheery voice was generally heard ringing out some order or direction when she knew whose was the ring that signalled a visitor. Surely she must have known this morning that none other than her affianced husband would have invaded her thus early? A sudden, stabbing suspicion that she "was ill" shot through Mr. Wyndham's heart. He could hardly frame his question for sheer nervousness, but the answer came promptly.

"Missus is quite well, sir, thank you. She's staying at Lord Roydmore's. There was a note came for her maid last night, and she packed up some of mis-

sus' things and went off in the carriage that brought the note, without saying a word."

Mr. Wyndham's face fell visibly.

"It is rather selfish of them to detain Helen, knowing as they must how she is situated with regard to you," Miss Wyndham said gently. "What shall we do, Ralph?"

"I shall follow her, and hear if her presence is absolutely essential to those poor young people in their distress. You had better wait here, Dorothy, my dear, till our return."

Miss Dorothy shook her head.

The time will seem shorter, Ralph, if I am shopping instead of waiting here alone. I shall go into The Grove and look at Whiteley's. Dear, dear! I bought the ribbons and flowers for my first ball at Whiteley's when he had only one little shop, with himself and two lady assistants. I shall pass my time very pleasantly; don't think of me, don't hurry, Ralph."

The hansom which conveyed Mr. Wyndham over to Lord Roydmore's house was well-horsed and smartly driven, but it seemed to him to crawl with malignant perversity. When he stepped out, it was with such almost boyish impatience that he slipped and hurt his knee on the threshold of his rival's door. The faint, sickening sensation, which is the invariable accompaniment to any fracture or displacement of the knee-cap, assailed him, and it was with a painful effort that he managed to hobble into the hall and reach a chair.

"Mrs. Collette is here, I understand?" he began; "give her my card, and ask her if she will kindly come here and speak to me. Unfortunately I feel unable to walk a step farther."

The sudden marriage by special licence of the day before had sent an electric shock through the whole household. The excitement had been so great, in fact, that every one was hoping for more. If Lord Roydmore had died from the effects of the agitation,

his faithful retainers would have pulled long faces, and spoken in the suppressed accents of spurious grief. But in what they had of heart they would have felt a melancholy pleasure in the serio-comedy ending in a tragedy. The family had all borne the unexpected introduction of Mrs. Collette into the first place in it with what the servants thought tame toleration. Accordingly, now it occurred to the butler and footman that they might as well have the pleasure of seeing this poor, unconscious gentleman get "a bloomin' surprise!" They pitied him for the anguish his displaced knee-cap was causing him, but that pain, they intuitively felt, would be nothing to that which he would endure when he learnt that the Mrs. Collette he was inquiring for so tenderly was transformed into Lady Roydmore.

"You take the card to her ladyship, while I get the gentleman a glass of sherry; he'll need it," the butler muttered in a low voice. Still, low as it was, Mr. Wyndham caught the word "ladyship," and felt puzzled by it, but not alarmed.

As he sat there alone, trying to believe that his knee was only bruised, and that as soon as he felt less faint he would be able to get up and walk he heard voices mingling in lively badinage coming down the stairs.

The first was a man's voice, a young clear, polished-toned voice, that struck agreeably on Mr. Wyndham's ear.

"My dear mamma," it was saying, "I shall claim all the privileges of a son—of a pet son, in fact. I shall go back with you to your own house, and destroy the photographs of all the good-looking fellows I find——"

"Jack, I won't let you come back with me to-day," Helen's voice answered, half comically, half earnestly. "I have to break the great news to my servants, and give them notice to quit me; and well, altogether, you will be in my way for once, my dear, new son."

They were in view of Mr. Wyndham now, crossing

the hall from the foot of the stairs towards the entrance-door, near which he sat, Helen herself looking brilliantly beautiful and happy in a handsome walking costume, and a good-looking young fellow, who had hold of her hand with an easy air of familiarity, and who was pretending to button her glove. At sight of Mr. Wyndham, pallid with pain and a ghastly sense of dread of the unknown, Jack Herries uttered an exclamation of surprise, and Helen a little cry of confusion. It was ghastly to her to be threatened with an ignominious, commonplace, unromantic overthrow in these first hours of triumph. For she had triumphed. Already she had won Jack to enlist under her banner, and swear to fight her battles, by the power of that physical beauty which she so well knew how to show in its most seductive light before the eyes of men. By this power, and by the sweet desire to please which she could put into her manner at any given moment, she had triumphed. But she felt that she had need of all these munitions of feminine war now, as she came unexpectedly upon the man to whom she had pledged herself the day before, and who still looked upon her as his betrothed wife.

"You are in pain," she cried, putting her hand on his shoulder; "my dear Mr. Wyndham, you must only speak to tell me how you are hurt. Your knee? Oh! I have always heard what a ghastly, sickly pain it is. Jack, Mr. Herries, will you order an ambulance to be fetched, and I will accompany my poor friend back to my own house, and send for his sister——"

"Dorothy is in town, Helen," Mr. Wyndham said, hopelessly hanging on to her hand, and trying to make her look into his poor, plump, miserable face. "She came up to congratulate us," he went on, but Helen hushed him down authoritatively.

"Not one word more till you are resting at my house, and a doctor and Dorothy are with you," she said aloud. Then she followed Jack Herries a little apart and whispered,—

“A dear, old, valued and eccentric friend of mine, Jack to whom the news of my sudden marriage will probably give some offence. He will think he ought to have been consulted. I will stay with him alone till the ambulance comes. The petulance of pain might make him say something before a third person which would be misleading, disagreeable for me, in fact, and a source of regret to him ; therefore don't let either Florence or Jane come near him.”

Jack nodded acquiescence to her request cheerfully, but he thought. “Poor old Johnnie, she has made a fool of you, has she? Well, the next best thing to fooling a pretty woman is to be fooled by one, and my new mamma is a jolly pretty woman and no mistake.

Lady Roydmore knew that Mr. Wyndham was too true and proud a gentleman to question servants, or even to lend an ear to their utterances. Accordingly, she left him with the butler and footman without distrust, while they waited for the ambulance. Meantime, she herself went back to the chamber of her legal lord. A few words of explanation from her own lips would be serviceable, in case anything should leak out during her absence.

Lord Roydmore was sitting up in a large comfortable chair by an open window, with a little table beside him covered with flowers, newspapers and letters. He was looking so much stronger and better than he had done on the previous day, that Helen felt there had been something like trickery in his hastening on their marriage on the plea that he feared speedy dissolution. However, he was hers to make the best of now, and she honestly determined to do it.

“An old gentleman called Wyndham—a very old friend of mine—came here to inquire for me just now, as his sister has come up to see me from Redhill, and he fell and has hurt his knee-cap. Jack has gone or sent for an ambulance, and I shall take him to my

old house, and have him nursed there by his sister,"

She put her hand on her husband's shoulder, and bent towards him as she spoke. A sickly odour of drugs and cosmetics hung about him. She drew back quickly, showing the physical disgust she felt more plainly than she had intended.

"It will be quite enough if Long goes with him ; send Long," he suggested, or rather ordered, in a tone that got up his newly-made wife's mettle at once.

"I told you *I* was going with him ; you must not try to make up or unmake my mind for me, Roydmore."

She spoke brightly. It was not in her programme to quarrel with or annoy him, but that he should not alter that programme was her fixed determination.

CHAPTER XI.

HELEN STARTS FRESH.

MISS WYNDHAM had done shopping and gone back to Mrs. Collette's house long before her brother, escorted by Helen, was conveyed thither. The little brougham containing Lady Roydmore had kept pace with the ambulance, consequently she had ample time to frame and polish the sentences that should make him acquainted with the revolution she had worked in his life and her own.

It would be embarrassing to the last degree. Cool and collected, not to say callous, as she was, Helen felt that it would be embarrassing to explain the motives which had influenced her and caused her to take the action she had taken on the previous day. She resolved to humble herself prettily before the kind old man whom she had befooled. She would heap up such blame upon her own head as would disarm him, and win his forgiveness. Penitential tears

should be freely shed. Fortunately he would be her sole audience, she thought. It would be easy to imply that she had preferred him to Lord Roydmour, though honour, pity and overwhelming circumstances had compelled her to marry the latter gentleman. He was so gentle-natured and generous that he would forgive her, she felt sure, and remain her fast friend in the future, as he had been in the past.

Her heart beat a trifle faster as she entered her own house, and began to give orders to her servants about the preparations to be made for his reception ; but it almost stood still when she was told that Miss Wyndham and Captain Stafford were both waiting for her in the drawing-room.

Here was an unforeseen complication. She knew Miss Dorothy far too well not to feel sure that she had been amiably garrulous on the subject of her brother's engagement. How Harry must be despising her. How much more would he despise her when the whole truth was told. On the whole, it must be conceded to her that she had good nerve to go in and face her visitors with such a story as she had to tell.

Captain Stafford was standing leaning up against the mantelpiece when she swept into the room. There was the shadow of a scowl on his handsome face as he listened to Miss Dorothy's words of greeting to their hostess.

"My dearest Helen, I have just been telling Captain Stafford what a happy and fortunate man my brother is——"

"Neither happy nor fortunate just at present, dear Miss Dorothy," Helen interrupted. "He has had an accident, hurt his knee ; they are taking him into the dining-room. Go to him, I will follow you in a few moments."

The fond old sister was out of the room and well on her way downstairs as Helen turned to Captain Stafford and held out her hand.

"Harry, shake hands with me. I know I am not

worth your friendship, but I can't bear to lose it."

"So you've jilted Lord Roydmere for this other poor old fool, have you?" he said, taking her hand reluctantly. Her fingers clasped his warmly and retained them. He could not help relenting towards her a little, and being thrilled by that firm, tender grasp.

"You will hate and despise me, I know you will," she said, musically and mournfully. "I have no excuse excepting the truth for my conduct. Poverty has forced me to play a hateful part. I have not jilted Lord Roydmere; I was married to him yesterday. Harry, dear Harry, when I lost you I vowed to have done with love. In making the marriage I have made, I have placed myself beyond the possibility of your suspecting that my heart has been fickle to you, whatever my conduct may have been."

"You are a wonderfully clever woman, Lady Roydmere, but I fail to see the point of your conduct; you could surely have married Lord Roydmere without entangling Mr. Wyndham in your net?"

"I had reasons to suppose that Lord Roydmere was being influenced against me by his family. I smarted under the mortifying dread of being thrown over. I was weak, wrong, culpable—I admit all that; but surely you can understand that a woman of my temperament would do anything rather than be pointed at as the left-off toy of a man old enough to be her father. Poor Mr. Wyndham, unhappily for himself, made me an offer while the fear of this mortification was upon me. I had scarcely accepted him before Jane Herries came to me with a piteous tale of her father's serious illness and desire to see me. He had provided a special licence. He worked upon my feelings, urging that he felt he was dying, and that it would brighten his last hours to know that I was his wife. Oh, can't you understand it all, Harry, and pity me? I only ask for your pity now; you surely will give it—you who so freely gave me much more once?"

He bent his head and touched her hand lightly with his lips.

"Yes, I do pity you, Helen ; I loved you awfully once, and something of the old feeling sticks, I suppose, for I can't feel as disgusted with you as I ought, considering how abominably you have behaved."

She looked full into his eyes for a few moments, then she said,—

"You loved me awfully once? It's sweet to hear you say so for the last time !"

"You're right there ; it *is* for the last time. I never go shares in anything ; if I can't have it for my own, why, I go without it altogether. Good-bye, Lady Roydmore. I suppose you will allow me to call on you, and let me try to console myself with your pretty step-daughter ?"

"I can wish my pretty step-daughter no better fate than to be your consoler," she said, a little unsteadily ; for she realised that never again would she hear words of either passion or sentiment from his lips. She also realised that she would never be able quite to forget those he had so often spoken to her in the past.

As soon as he was gone, she went down to inquire for and explain herself to Mr. Wyndham. She found him lying, looking pale and very much exhausted, on the sofa, and she was telling herself that she would defer her disclosure till another day, when he forced her hand by saying,—

"Helen, I heard some words spoken at Lord Roydmore's house that have perplexed and distressed me painfully. The servants spoke of 'her ladyship,' and I gathered that they referred to you. Clear up this mystery for me—restore my peace of mind and confidence in you—if you can."

"If Miss Dorothy will leave us alone for a few minutes, I will explain——" she was beginning, when he interrupted her to say,—

"'Miss' Dorothy ! Surely your sister that is to be need not be so formally addressed. Dorothy, my

dear, let it be as Helen wishes; leave us alone for a little time."

"Make him happy again, Helen," Miss Dorothy whispered, as she passed out of the room; and then Helen knelt by the side of the sofa, and covered her face with her hands. All the neatly-framed and polished sentences fled from her mind, and she could only stammer out the bald, cruel truth.

"You will never forgive me! I weakly let myself be persuaded to gratify the whim of a man who believed himself to be dying. I married Lord Roydmore yesterday."

There was a long, long pause, during which Helen still kept her face buried in her hands. At length the tension became too great—the silence and the suspense became too unbearable. She looked up, intending to add a few words of excuse, and breathe a little prayer for pardon. But the sight that met her eyes sealed her lips. Mr. Wyndham was crying silently, but very bitterly.

"This is a heavier punishment than I can bear," she cried desperately. "Mr. Wyndham, I am not worth a regretful thought, much less a tear from you. I am selfish, cold——"

"Hush!" He interrupted her self-denunciation with a gesture so full of grief and pain that she obeyed the gesture with something of the same solemn respect which she would have accorded to deathbed words. "You shall not say cruel and disparaging words of the woman I asked to be my wife yesterday," he went on. "That woman is as dead to me as if she were lying in her grave. *You* have no part in her, Lady Roydmore."

She was crying as bitterly now as he had been a minute before, but in the midst of her contrition and confusion she remembered the ring which Miss Dorothy had given her, and removed it from her finger.

"Give it back to her from me; I can't see her; I have borne enough in seeing your contempt for me, your grief for the woman you believed me to be."

“Keep the ring, you have worn it ; Dorothy would never look at it again,” he said quickly ; and then the lines of pain grew deeper on his poor, plain old face, and Helen hastened to remove herself from his presence, on the ground of seeking better attendance for him.

Within an hour, accompanied by his sister, who looked little less shattered than himself, Mr. Wyndham was on his way back to the home at Redhill, which he had intended to idealise and beautify into a fitting receptacle for one whom he believed to be the pearl of womankind. As he went, he firmly intended, and Helen thought, that never again in this world would their paths cross ; and to her there was a certain sense of relief in this fixed idea. As she drove back to her husband’s home, she felt that she had (though at the expense of a good deal of current feeling) surmounted the Wyndham difficulty very neatly, and she quoted with a keen sense of satisfaction some lines which Captain Stafford had written to her in one of his moments of cynicism.

“—Hand in hand we trod the way
That was pleasant while it lasted—
Ah ! so pleasant ! bless the day
When we met !

“Life has stores of many pleasures
If we take them when we can,
One perhaps the best of all is,
For a woman and a man
To forget !”

“Poor old Wyndham !” she thought approvingly ; “I knew he wouldn’t be vindictive, but how awkward it would have been if he had blundered out anything about being engaged to me before Jack ! It was the pain kept him dumb, I suppose. On the whole, he sprained his knee-cap very opportunely. As it is, I can start fresh.”

CHAPTER XII.

A LESSON IN LOVE.

As Lord Roydmore recovered somewhat rapidly from the illness which had at one time seemed so serious, his wife withdrew herself more and more from that rather dreary domestic round with which he had vainly imagined she would be contented. She had paid for her whistle, and she would have it. At this juncture, Jane was a capital peg on which her step-mother could hang up her innumerable excuses for making a distinguished onslaught on society, and carrying her forces into the wildest fastnesses.

Several times, when Lord Roydmore had complained of liver-agueish sensations, fever, chill, gouty symptoms and a few other ailments to which he was prone, Mrs. Graves had offered to relieve Lady Roydmore of the office of chaperoning Jane. But Jane was a strong card, and Helen determined that no one should play it but herself.

It never occurred to the woman to ask herself "why" she was stimulating the girl's curiosity about, and interest in, Captain Stafford. But Helen could no more resist doing this than she could leave off breathing while the life was strong within her. Somewhere, away down at the bottom of her heart, she believed that there was a little danger to her own peace of mind in a renewal of any kind of intercourse with "Harry," as she always called him to herself. But in her superficial and surface treatment of the case, she affected to think that she might extract a great deal of pure, pleasurable, friendly feeling from editing and supervising the growth of affectionate relations between him and Jane.

It was the night of the ball at their own house that

Lady Roydmore had an opportunity for the first time of putting her theories into practice. Captain Stafford had dined with them, and had conveyed the intimation to her during dinner that he had to rejoin the first battalion of his regiment, just home from Burmah, at Plymouth.

"Where, I hope," he added, "we shall stick for a time."

Lady Roydmore threw up her head, and expressed general disgust both by the expression of her eyes and hands.

"Why isolate yourself in that way? Why not send in your papers, and live and move and have your being unfettered by service bothers?" she asked impatiently, and he answered laughingly,—

"It's not penal servitude by any means being quartered in Plymouth, I assure you; and I don't send my papers in because I see there's a chance of a row coming off somewhere soon, and I want to be in it."

"Besides, you wouldn't be quite the 'you' that you are if you left the service," Jane put in enthusiastically. "And how sick you would feel if there did come a row and you weren't in it."

"Is it the red jacket that you pin your faith upon, Miss Herries? Do you think when a man's out of it that he ceases to be a soldier?"

"Indeed I don't, but I think I should like to think of you as one of the men who can put it on when they please;" and as she finished her little say, which was surely harmless enough, Lady Roydmore's voice cut in, clear and incisively,—

"I take you more on trust than these young people are inclined to do, Captain Stafford. No mufti can conceal the real soldier who has proved himself one. My daughter Jane thinks a great deal of the red coat still, and she is not critical about the way in which medals have been won, so long as she sees them worn."

"I don't think your daughter Jane is so indiscrimi-

nating," he answered, speaking to Lady Roydmore, and looking at Jane; and in response to that look Jane experienced the first little throb of gratitude which she had ever been called upon to feel for a man who had saved her from an awkward social dilemma. To be classed with the commonplace women who only care for the red coat had been galling to her. To have been rescued from that class by Captain Stafford, who knew so much more about it all than Lady Roydmore could pretend to do, was the most soothing ointment that could possibly have been applied to the gall.

Lady Roydmore was to begin to receive her ball guests at ten o'clock. Jane thought the dinner would never come to an end, but by half-past nine they had scattered themselves—the women to retouch their more delicate personal decorations, the men to taste the invigorating joys of the cigarette. It was just a chance that he might find the pretty unmarried daughter of the house giving one last look to the floral adornments of the ballroom, but, at any rate, Captain Stafford thought that he would try it. Purposely, he had come without a buttonhole, feeling sure that Helen would have one for him. But now it occurred to him that it would be rather nice to get an impromptu one from Jane.

He had expected to find her, but still his pulses beat a throb the faster as he passed through the still empty ballroom, and found Miss Herries standing a foot or two away from the conservatory entrance, in the shadow of some palms.

"I go up one in my own estimation. I thought I should find you here," he said, stepping up beside her, and speaking boldly, as she already was learning to love to hear him step and speak.

"And I thought you would come here; so sure, that—" She paused, cast a rapid glance round the rows of plants burdened with heavily-scented flowers, then added, "I came here to choose you a flower for your buttonhole; I saw you had none."

“ I came without on purpose, trusting to your generosity and sweet taste, Miss Herries,” he answered mendaciously ; and for answer she plucked out a bit of myrtle and jasmine from the artistically-arranged stack of these flowers she carried. A little thread of silver, drawn cunningly from some embroidery on the lace flounce of her frock, bound the little white blossoms securely together, and she was fastening them into his coat with a pretty air of fastidiousness, when the swirl of Helen’s dress and the sound of Helen’s voice made the man, not the girl, step back like a guilty thing.

“ Your father wishes you to wear your pearl necklace to-night, Jane. I am surprised not to see it on. Lord Roydmore will be more than annoyed to find that you have *forgotten* to wear it, as Florence has *forgotten* to bring up her ruby necklace. Go and get it, dear, at once.”

Lady Roydmore uttered her mandate with a pretty air of affectionate, half-playful, maternal authority ; but she looked far too young in her sheeny robe of gold-coloured silk, draped with chiffon, to be the mother of the girl she addressed. The chiffon was gathered into loose rosettes round the petticoat and train, and in the heart of each rosette lurked a diamond. Dimonds encircled her graceful throat and slender arms, flashed out from the dusky recesses of her hair, and glinted up as buckles from her shoes.

“ She is a glorious creature—a real, ripping beauty,” Captain Stafford confessed to himself, as she faced him dauntlessly under a strong light, defying him, as it seemed, to find her one whit less attractive than her much younger step-daughter. Her figure was so perfectly preserved, her waist so lissom and slim, her back so nicely graduated and straight, her bust so perfect in its firm, round, richly-voluptuous proportions, that the girl’s figure, slender and graceful as it was, looked poor and meagre beside it. For one moment a fierce anger against himself possessed him that he had been inert enough to let this woman slip

from his grasp. The next instant a higher, purer, instinct possessed him, and he rejoiced in the power that was still his to try, at least, to win the girl whose life was an undefiled, spotless, unwritten page still. The flowers she had placed in his buttonhole were still trembling from her touch. He turned to look at her, and saw her shivering with nervousness and fear.

"Oh, Lady Roydmore," she was pleading, "*do* ask papa not to be angry with me. I can't wear my pearls to-night, I have sent them to be—— I mean they are being cleaned, or re-set, or something. I shall have them back in a few days. Papa must forgive me for not wearing them to-night."

"My dear child, go and explain the matter to your father yourself. *I* dare not undertake to be your ambassadress in such a matter as this. Silly child! to have pearls that did not need re-setting re-set just now. However, it's no use my scolding you, dear; go up and tell your tale to papa as prettily as you have told it to me, and he will forgive you."

She put her well-rounded, diamond-enriched arm round Jane's waist as she spoke, and dragged that very unwilling young woman to the door.

"Go, go to papa and make it all right with him, and then come back to me, and I'll ensure you *such* a pleasant evening, my darling child," Helen whispered softly; but Jane, though she obeyed, did so most unwillingly and ungraciously. She knew that the task of "making it right with papa" about the pearl necklace was one she could not hope to accomplish—just yet. She also knew that, while she was away on this hopeless undertaking, her loving step-mother would undo a goodly portion of the spotless web she (Jane) had begun to weave about Captain Stafford's willing feet. What wonder that she obeyed the step-maternal mandate unwillingly. What wonder that her heart beat horribly fast with wounded pride, and some softer, sweeter feeling as she caught a glimpse of Captain Stafford's face in passing out. That face which had been bent so tenderly, so almost lovingly

towards her when her step-mother had so ruthlessly interrupted them, wore an expression of stern disapprobation now which she was utterly unable to account for. She would have been even more wretched than she was had she known that he was thinking something to the following effect,—

“Her innocence and child-like frankness are assumed; she’s tarred with the same brush as her sister, and her pearls have gone to pay gambling debts, probably.”

Happily for Jane’s current peace of mind, they were not dwelling in the “Palace of Truth,” consequently she remained unconscious of his unjust suspicion.

The girl went upstairs sadly enough, but not to seek her father, as she had been bidden. She went into Mrs. Graves’ dressing-room, and found that lady putting some delicate finishing touches to her already exquisite complexion.

“Oh! Flo!” Miss Herries began piteously, “it will all come out now! I knew it would. I’m in an awful fright——”

“*What* must all come out? You made me jump, so that I’ve dabbed it on so that one cheek looks like a dairymaid’s. I wish you would leave off your playful, puppy ways, and learn to walk into a room quietly; at least I wish you would do it when I happen to be in the room.”

“But, Flo, do listen; Lady Roydmore has just told me I am to wear my pearl necklace.”

“Tell Lady Roydmore to mind her own business, and don’t you come and worry me about it. I am sick of the word necklace. Papa sent for me just now—at that woman’s instigation, I believe—and ordered me to wear my rubies to-night. I told him they were locked up at The Court, and that I wouldn’t entrust my private key to any one, so that matter was settled very soon.”

“*What am* I to say to papa?” Jane asked dejectedly.

“Say anything that comes into your head, only take care that what you say will stand worrying, for

Helen won't let the subject lie down and die a natural death if she can help it. Why did you go down so early, and risk an encounter with our beloved new mamma?"

"I went down to get a flower from the conservatory."

"And to meet Captain Stafford? I hope he didn't disappoint you? Take care, though; he's rather starched where girls are concerned. If he thinks you are running after him—or even crawling towards him—he will fly."

"He will never think that I am doing either! You are unkind, Flo. You have said the very thing to make me stiff, and cool, and awkward to a man I was really beginning to like."

"The stiffness, coolness and awkwardness will vanish in the course of the evening, I venture to prophesy. Come down now with me; the room must be half full by this time, and Lady Roydmore will have no time to make you feel uncomfortable about the pearls. Moreover, she will have no inclination to do it while you are under my wing."

"How about papa?"

"He will be so occupied with his own ailments, and with watching his precious Helen, that he will have no time to notice anything else. Come! don't look as doleful as if you had lost a lover or your beauty."

"I was so happy before Lady Roydmore reminded me of the wretched pearls; now I feel as if I could never be happy again," Jane said mournfully, but her sister, instead of according her any sympathy, only laughed at her, and ran down the stairs to the ball-room, looking far younger and lighter-hearted than the Honourable Jane.

The room was well filled, and the appearance of the daughters of the house was the signal for the dancing to commence. To Jane's agony, her programme was filled in a few minutes, before she had even seen Captain Stafford. Her eyes roved in all

directions in search of him, as she flew round the room in the arms of other men. But it was not till after the sixth waltz that she caught a glimpse of him talking earnestly, as it seemed to her, to a tall, fair, stately, golden-haired girl, who in turn was giving him the most flatteringly absorbed attention.

Poor Jane, she had already reached the stage with regard to this man of feeling a touch of uneasiness whenever he spoke to or looked at another woman, unless that woman happened to be very safely old and ugly. It pained her dreadfully to see his air of devotion to the golden-haired beauty who was a stranger to her, yet at the same time she could not resist the fascination of watching him. So she suggested sitting out the remainder of the waltz, and then disappointed her partner by refusing to go into any one of the shady nooks which had been devised in divers places for those who wished to be of "the world forgetting, by the world forgot" order for the time.

"Let us sit down here and watch the dancing," she said, placing herself in a corner from whence she commanded a perfect view of Captain Stafford and his striking companion. Presently she winced, and answered her partner at random. The golden-haired girl had taken off her glove, and resigned her hand into Captain Stafford's keeping, who was closely inspecting her rings.

"Oh, we may as well dance; it's no use sitting here," she exclaimed inconsequently; but before she could rise he had looked up and seen the unmistakable expression of the worst pain a woman can endure—jealousy—on her face. In a moment he had dropped the other girl's hand and had crossed over to the now triumphant Jane.

"I have been looking for you between each dance; where have you been hiding? Give me the next, won't you?" he began, taking up her programme and coolly setting his initials over those of several other men.

The late partner, feeling very much like a rudderless ship, had considerably bowed himself off. Jane stole a look at the golden-haired girl, expecting to see an air of indignant rivalry about her. To the surprise of Miss Herries, Captain Stafford's late companion was looking as well pleased as before.

"It's because she feels sure of him ; it must be that, or she would hate to be left for me," poor jealous Jane thought. But the next moment the jealousy, possible, rivalry, all, everything faded, as he offered her his arm and led her away to one of the aforesaid nooks.

"I wanted to have a yarn with you ; never can talk with a hundred people's eyes on me, can you?" he asked, as they seated themselves side by side in a cosy corner that might have been in Arcadia, so entirely was it screened off by its floral walls from all worldly sights and sounds.

Jane heaved a happy sigh. - She was so absolutely content that she could find no words to express it. Just to sit there by his side, away from every one else, feeling his eyes fixed upon her with that look in them which tells a sweeter story than any spoken words can tell, was enough for her. Every nerve, every fibre in her was thrilled by that look. What a lovely place the world was. What had she done to deserve such happiness as this, that he should look as if he loved her?

Her silence gave him time to think, and this first thought was that he was going a little too fast. She was a darling. "A fetching darling," he called her to himself, but before he went much farther at this mad, delicious gallop he must know a little more about the whereabouts of that pearl necklace. Those sweet, delicately-carved red lips had spoken words concerning the absence of that necklace which he felt were not true. It pleased him to recall the fact that these lips had quivered with painful emotion while uttering the little fiction. But that they should have uttered it at all put him off, and made him feel that he was going too fast.

Still, the hour's influence urged him on. The subdued strains from afar, the scent of the flowers that encircled them as they sat so near together that each could hear the other's heart beat, the knowledge that she loved him already (this is a branch of knowledge in which man is generally proficient) all combined to test his self-restraint to the utmost. He began to speak of the strange sense of sympathy which he had experienced towards her when they met first, and he had given her a flower lesson in Helen Collette's drawing-room. His own utterances urged him on. Before he knew what he was doing, he had taken her hand, told her how he had loved her from that day, drawn her towards him, pressed his lips on her too willing ones, and was on the brink of asking her to be his wife when there came an interruption which restored to him all his powers of self-control, all his prudent resolves. A sound of sudden turmoil, cries, excited orders given one moment, and rescinded the next, the voice of rushing, undisciplined, alarmed footsteps, then the tearing aside of the floral screen, and the request that "Miss Herries would come at once; his lordship had had a stroke," from the terrified servant who gave the order and explanation all in one breath, and after that chaos.

Lord Roydmore's case was hopeless from the first, but even in the midst of all the sorrowful agony she felt at losing her father so suddenly and so shockingly, Jane's young human heart cherished the memory of those moments which she had passed with Harry Stafford—moments of such passionate sweetness that they seemed to belong to a better world than the one in which these other people lived. A world of love and rapture, in which there would never be regret or remorse, disappointment, jealousy or care. A world in which it would be all kissing the lips each loved the best, and looking into the eyes that each thought the sweetest ever seen. A world made up of Harry Stafford and herself, in fact—poor, romantic, credulous, loving-hearted Jane.

CHAPTER I.

A USEFUL OLD FRIEND.

By the time Lady Roydmore emerged from the strict retirement which she ordained for herself and her unmarried step-daughter during the earlier weeks of her widowhood, Captain Stafford had gone down to join his regiment at Plymouth. This was very gratifying to Helen for many reasons, the chief one being that he would, for some time, at least be spared the danger of coming under Jane's personal influence.

The widow, by her late husband's will, was a tolerably wealthy woman now, and she determined to use her wealth for the attainment of every pleasurable purpose of her life. One of these purposes might be frustrated by the renewal of intercourse between Harry Stafford and Jane.

Helen had accepted the loan of her step-son's house for a couple of months after ceasing to be its mistress, and naturally Jane had remained with her during the time. But as soon as the new Lord Roydmore had established himself at Roydmore, the widow resolved to alter the existing order of things, and rid herself of the responsibility of being the guardian of a girl who was not her own child.

"I think, till Roydmore marries, you should be at the head of his household, Jane. Just think what a charming position you would have. You would be a little queen in the county, and when you came up to town you would have ever so much better a time with a nice, go-ahead fellow like Jack than you can ever have with an old and unimportant woman like me."

Jane knew that there must be much lurking behind

this newly-born humility of her versatile step-mother ; but what it was composed of puzzled her. It could not be that Lady Roydmore feared that her step-daughter might become a drain on her purse, for her father had secured Jane's independence by leaving her six hundred a year. Nor could it be that the obligation of taking her into the world appalled Lady Roydmore, who was never so happy as when playing her varied parts before as much of the world as could see her. For her own part, Jane would have liked to remain with Helen, who was always kind and lively and sympathetic. In Helen's house, too, the girl thought she would surely have opportunities of seeing Captain Stafford again before long ; and to see Captain Stafford again was now the one great craving desire of her life. Jane was very fond of her brother, but the prospect of holding the exalted position of mistress of his house on an uncertain tenure, for probably a brief time, had no charms for her. Of course, Jack would marry soon. It was not to be supposed for a moment that a young, good-looking fellow, with an old title and moderately fair rent-roll, would be allowed to retain his liberty long in a set abounding with farsighted mothers and dutiful daughters, well disposed to see things appertaining to their future with their parents' eyes. No ; Roydmore was a dear brother, but Jane made up her mind that she would not hamper him by casting the care of herself upon him. So it was settled that for a time, at least, she should go down to The Court and make her sister's house her home, an arrangement that fell in agreeably with Florence's views, and she felt that Jane's income, judiciously handled, might be very serviceable to her (Mrs. Graves) in unforeseen emergencies.

"I don't understand, though, what Lady Roydmore's motive can be for getting rid of you so soon. She has one, of course ; she's a woman who never does anything without a motive, and it's generally a bad one. Decency forbids her marrying for a few months, at least, and during those few months I

should have thought she would have been glad to take you in and spend your money for you. However, don't think I am anything but pleased at the prospect of your coming to me; I can always make you the excuse to Geof for going anywhere and everywhere, if he is inclined to grumble. One never knows when or at what a husband is going to grumble, so it's as well to be prepared."

Florence said this after it had been settled that Jane was to go down to The Court in a few days as a permanent guest. There was no fear now, Mrs. Graves thought, of the girl taking alarm at the sentiments expressed, and backing out of the agreement. Jane, however, protested forcibly.

"I won't be used as a blind, or as a birch-rod to punish Geof in any way. He is much too good to you, Flo, and if you want to take me anywhere Geof does not want you to go, I shall not go. You shall not make me the excuse for displeasing Geof."

"My dear child, you will soon find that you will get a great deal more fun out of life by siding with me than by siding with Geof. Captain Salusbury is going to bring the Adonis of his regiment down to Penarth hall at Christmas. We shall be such a jolly quartette, for the Adonis is not a mere beauty-man, but is very clever and amusing, Bob Salusbury says."

"Captain Salusbury is the man Geof likes the least of all your Penarth set, isn't he?"

Florence shrugged her shapely shoulders.

"If you're ever fortunate enough to land Captain Stafford—or any other man—in your little net, Jane, you will speedily discover that husbands like least the men who have the good taste to like their wives best. Bob Salusbury happens to have found a kindred spirit in me——"

"A kindred fiddlestick," Jane interrupted impatiently. "Why do you call him Bob as if he were your brother, or you'd known him all your life? That must annoy Geof. I didn't like what I saw of Captain Salusbury at that awful ball of ours——"

“Then your taste is more excruciatingly bad than ever I thought it,” Florence put in carelessly. “His looks are just perfect—distinguished, fine, splendid form. Find a fault with his personal appearance or manner if you can—and your judgment can only be founded on his looks and manner, for I know he didn’t speak to you.”

As her sister spoke, Jane’s conscience smote her. In just such words as Florence was using about Captain Salusbury would she (Jane) have described Captain Stafford—if she dared. Perhaps, after all, there was no harm in the married woman’s rhapsodising in this way. It was only that she had the courage of her opinions. It came into the girl’s mind that if she had been married herself before she met Harry Stafford, she would have felt it to be a cruel and puerile exercise of authority on her imaginary husband’s part had he in any way tabooed, condemned or stultified their intimacy. Ah! but then Harry Stafford was as different and superior to Captain Salusbury as—well, as the man a woman loves always is to every other man in the world.

She made no answer to her sister’s remarks. Her thoughts went wandering back to that night of nights, when he had drawn her close to him, whispered that he loved her, and kissed her as she had never been kissed before, and “never would be again, unless it were by him,” she vowed. How intensely happy she had been for those few blissful moments. How grateful she had felt for having been born, and for having been born pretty. How she had longed to open her heart freely to him, and tell him that, in return for every atom of love which he gave her, she gave him a hundred-fold in return! How difficult it had been to refrain from clinging to him, and calling him her own, her love! When she had been summoned to her dying father, how dreadful it had been to feel in the middle of her sorrow that her sorrow would be lightened if she could have had him with her every hour, every minute! And with what a dull thud

of disappointment had her poor, trusting little heart gone down when she had heard that he had gone away to Plymouth without giving her another word, or even sending her one little line !

Jane had never frittered her feelings away by suffering them to become engaged on the slight provocation of every man's passing attention, as the manner of some is. She had thought and dreamt of love and a possible lover as every girl does, but she had never indulged in the fancy of having found one until she met Captain Stafford. Then without an effort—she admitted honestly to herself that it was without an effort—he had conquered her, won her to him so closely that to sever her from him would be to wound her to death.

For days, for weeks, for months she went on nursing the happy hope that he would come to her soon. And when time went on in its remorselessly indifferent way, and still he came not, she stimulated her fainting heart with the thought that “of course he couldn't come, as he didn't know her address.” A dozen times she was on the brink of sending it to him, but the delicate instincts of her class and sex saved her from committing this act of madness.

She was in frequent correspondence with Lady Roydmore for the first two months of her residence at the Court. Helen was not at all above being curious as to the daily doings, the domestic bickerings and the social round of the Graves'. Jane was not a gossip-monger, still, in writing to a woman who always wrote affectionately and (apparently) confidentially to her, the girl naturally wrote freely of what was going on around her. She never censured Florence, but it leaked out in her letters sometimes that Florence was both indiscreet and extravagant, and that Geoffrey was not quite as happy as she would like to see him. It also leaked out that she herself was in a chronic state of impecuniosity, though her personal expenses were very small. From all of which Lady Roydmore gathered that The Court was

not a happy home for Jane. Nevertheless, Helen hardened what she had of heart, and abstained from opening her arms and her doors to her dead husband's daughter.

At the end of two months there came a break in the correspondence. Two or three of Jane's letters remained unanswered, and even an inquiring telegram brought forth no reply. The reason of this was that Lady Roydmore had no desire to excite Jane's suspicions until these, however strongly aroused, would be powerless to interfere with her.

The fact was, that from the day of her release from the bondage of matrimony, Helen had been filled with a hungrily, passionate desire to re-capture Harry Stafford. She could afford to let herself love him now, and she did it with all the long pent-up forces of her nature. She knew that she was considerably his senior, she knew that men are not wont to be faithful to charms that are very fully matured. But what matter! "A woman is as old as she looks," she reminded herself, and there were days when Helen did not look a week more than five-and-twenty. As for the possible faithlessness, she felt that she could bear it from him if only she were his wife. He was too much of a gentleman to desert or openly neglect the woman to whom he should give his name, and for the rest, "I'd love him into loving me if I had the opportunity," she thought.

She knew that it would be waste of time to write to him. Her letter would conjure up no vision of that dangerous beauty of hers which he had once found so irresistible. It would, in all probability, affect him so little that he would neglect to answer it. Moreover, in her present circumstances she could not with good taste write him one of those smart, semiscandalous effusions which most men found so amusing, and for which she was rather famous. On the other hand, she could not infuse anything like a touch of sentiment into her letter without alarming him. No; it was her personal influence, her personal beauty which she

must bring to bear upon him, until, before he knew what he was about, he should succumb to it.

It was difficult to know what to do in order to effect this. If she went down to Plymouth on pretence of wishing for sea air and seeing the country round, he *would* see through the shallow pretence, and laugh at her openly. She must have an object which she could avow, and which he might be persuaded to believe.

For a day or two she racked her mind in the vain endeavour to invent such an object. At the end of that time a happy effort of memory brought to her mind the remembrance of the existence of an old school friend who had some years ago married a doctor and gone down to live in Devonshire. She remembered, too, that the place of this doctor's abode was—blessed coincidence!—in a village near Plymouth.

How to get hold of Mrs. Abbot's address, that was the next question. It must have been at least ten years since she had heard from or seen "poor old Lou," as she now thought of the long-lost-sight-of one rather affectionately. But in "poor old Lou's" maiden days, Helen had been in the habit of going and spending days, with which she had nothing better to do, with Lou and her mother, Mrs. Baron, out at the latter's little cottage of gentility, in a very secluded part of the oldest portion of Hampstead. She recalled the locality easily. It was to the left of the High Street, going Hampstead Heathwards, and it had some local traditional importance, as having at one time been inhabited by Keats, and haunted by the living forms of Shelley, Leigh Hunt, and others of that immortal band. The old lady had been intensely proud of these traditions, though she had never read a line written by these aforesaid poets in her life. If she was alive still, Lady Roydmore felt confident that she would find Mrs. Baron still knitting in the shady parlour, and still looking at the trees—whose boughs nearly swept the shrub-bespangled lawn—under whose

shade Keats, and Shelley, and Leigh Hunt had sat and talked of politics, religion and morality in a way that would have made Mrs. Baron's hair stand on end could she have heard them.

Fortune favours those who strongly favour themselves, Mrs. Baron was alive and at home, and most gratefully glad to give her daughter's address to Lady Roydmore. It was called "Plym Tor," though the Plym was a rather far cry from it, and there was not the slightest semblance of a "tor" anywhere near; and the village in which it was situated was within half-a-dozen miles of Plymouth.

That same day, a box containing suitable presents for Mrs. Abbot's four children, and an affectionately reminding letter for herself, was despatched to the mistress of Plym Tor. Within a week Helen found herself being earnestly entreated by her old friend to come down and try what the fresh air and the quiet of the country would do for the "lowered tone" from which she declared herself to be suffering. Lady Roydmore could always command fresh air without taking an intolerably long railway journey in search of it, and there were few things she hated more on earth than the quiet of the country. Nevertheless, she went down to Plym Tor with a grateful and flattering readiness that struck Mrs. Abbot as being remarkably sweet in one so popular, smart beautiful and sought after as her old friend Lady Roydmore.

CHAPTER II.

DOLLY.

IN common with the beautiful city of Prague, the latitude and longitude of the village in which Lady Roydmore's conveniently-remembered friend dwelt is rather uncertain and vague. At least, a hazy indistinctness shall be preserved as to its exact locality.

It is easy to do this, for the salient features of the majority of villages in that lovely, lotus-eating western land closely resemble one another. They are invariably well wooded and watered. There is generally to be found within their borders two or three old manorial dwelling-places, and a fine view of the Dartmoor hills. Their churches, in a few instances are touchingly picturesque, by reason of the unopposed attacks of Time. But in the majority of cases they are restored to more than their original beauty, and are admirably ordered and well kept. As a rule, they are at an inconvenient distance from a railway station, but are in convenient proximity to a trout-stream ; and it may be added to their credit that the cream and butter which they supply is nearly equal to that to be procured at Tucker's in the Strand.

It was at that rather dour hour six on a November evening when Helen arrived at Plym Tor. She had disliked the drive from the three-mile distant railway station extremely. Her old friend had met her with many warm manifestations of delight, but with a dog-cart whose horribly high step caused Helen's exquisitely laced skirts to split as she stepped into it.

"Why didn't you tell me to come down in elastic, if this is the sort of thing I have to do?" she asked, when, after having landed herself safely on the seat, and been rapturously welcomed by Mrs. Abbot, she recovered her breath.

"Oh, you'll get used to the way of it in time—long before you leave us, I hope, Helen," Mrs. Abbot responded cheerfully. "You see, this dog-cart is the only thing Dolly and I can command as our very own. My husband wants the brougham for night-work, and oh, my dear Helen, if you knew what 'night-work' in a country district means for a doctor, you'd pity me."

"You look very jolly," Helen said encouragingly ;
"I expected to find you—well, different to what you

are. Dear old Lou! after all these years of non-intercourse, how delicious it is to meet and find you so very much the same."

"But you're not the same, Helen," the lady who was driving the dog-cart said quickly, casting a keen, inspecting glance over her friend; "you were a wonderfully pretty girl, but now you are a much more beautiful woman. What is it? what have you done to yourself?"

"Lived and learnt!" said Helen tersely.

"The lesson seems to have been a pleasant one," Mrs. Abbot answered cheerfully. "Now, here we are," and as she spoke she turned her steady-going old cob into the short carriage-drive which cut through an extremely verdant garden to the entrance door of Plym Tor.

As they pulled up and she rang at the bell (Mrs. Abbot dispensed with the services of groom or page), there arose sounds from within that made Helen wish that she were not quite so infatuated with Captain Stafford as ever to have come to Plym Tor. Yell upon yell was borne through the unopened door to their afflicted ears, yells that deadened the groom's attempt to explain something which it was necessary that he should explain to his mistress; yells that made every unsuspected grey hair in Helen's head turn with sorrow in its grave; yells that curdled the blood in the veins of an amiable cat who was prowling round; yells that in their savagely wild and penetrating force ought to have proceeded from an infuriated band of wild Indians, but that did actually come from a tawny dachshund possessed of the sweetest temper and the softest brown eyes that ever endeared a dog to his family.

"It's only Fritz, don't mind him; he is so glad to see us, dear thing!" Mrs. Abbot explained, as the dog bundled down the porch steps, and hurled himself as affectionately upon Helen as if she had been a friend of his youth. "And this is my husband, Tom Abbot," Mrs. Abbot screamed out,

trying to drown the dachshund's yells of welcome while she went through the necessary form of introduction between Lady Roydmore and a tall, kindly, jolly-looking man who came forward at the moment. "You must call him Tom; all my friends call him Tom. Oh, *do* stop that dog, some one! get out, you darling! Dolly! Where is Dolly? Come here, Dolly, and let me introduce you to Lady Roydmore."

"Here I am, Aunt Lou," a voice replied, in what struck Helen as being an affectedly low and gentle tone, and at the same moment a slim girl of middle height came from a brilliantly fire-lighted room, and stood quietly waiting for the proffered introduction.

"This is Tom's niece, Dolly Abbot. Dolly, I hope you have seen that the fire is burning well in Lady Roydmore's room—it has come over so terribly damp and cold; and have you ordered tea?"

"I suppose the servants have seen to Lady Roydmore's fire; and as we always have tea at five, there was no need to order it specially to-night."

The girl's manner, looks and tone were all so intensely supercilious, that Helen conceived an aversion to her on the spot, an aversion that was destined to deepen considerably before she and Dolly Abbot had done with one another.

By-and-by, when the two old friends were having a cheering cup and confidential chat in Lady Roydmore's bedroom, the latter suddenly interrupted the flow of reminiscences to say,—

"By the way, Lou, what a singularly aggressive and 'haughty milliner' manner your niece has. Am I the first stranger who has ever loomed upon her barbaric horizon, that she treated me to such a display of mingled savagery and sulks?"

"She's rather a queer girl," Mrs. Abbot conceded, with a laugh, "but not at all the unsophisticated country girl you take her to be. Her father was a paymaster in the Navy, and since his death, twelve years ago, Dolly and her mother have lived in Ply-

mouth till a year ago, when Mrs. Abbot died, and Dolly came to live with her uncle and me. Her worst fault is her vanity, and her greatest weakness is a frantic desire to marry some one—any one who will take her. Young as she is, she is like the Three Old Maids of Lee in her requirements in a husband—‘he need not a poet or handsome be, he need not woo on his bended knee.’ If he’ll only take her away from—here. You can’t wonder at it, poor girl; she has neither fortune nor the brains to support herself. It’s natural that she should long to fulfil woman’s mission—marry, and have a home of her own.”

“Her manner is likely to enrapture men,” Helen said drily.

“Her manner is quite different to men, that’s the silly part of it,” Mrs. Abbot explained eagerly. “She is quite a different girl when men are by.”

“That’s a pleasing habit many girls acquire who are in a second-rate swim in a garrison town,” Lady Roydmore said scornfully; and good-natured Mrs. Abbot was silent, under the painful conviction that she had, in her endeavour to apologise for and excuse her husband’s niece, put the latter in a worse light even than that in which Helen had been disposed to regard her at first.

Presently, as the silence grew oppressive, Mrs. Abbot rose from the low chair by the cheerfully crackling fire with the words,—

“We dine at seven, dear. I hope you won’t find this first evening dull. I know how different your life is to mine, I am so afraid of your finding this monotonous. I thought of asking one or two men from Plymouth to come and dine with us; but then, again, I hardly knew——”

Lady Roydmore interrupted with a little laugh, and the words,—

“My dear Lou, please don’t go into retreat on my account. My husband has been dead five months, surely I may dine in the society of one or two men without being considered heartless by the most local

of Mrs. Grundys. Don't alter your usual routine for me ; if I thought you were going to do that, I would be off to-morrow."

"What a relief to hear you say that, Helen. We are not by any means gay people—to you we shall appear to be steeped in dulness—but still we manage to go to a good many things in Plymouth, concerts, and the theatre, and at-homes, and—oh, well, most things that are going on."

Neither concerts, country theatres nor at-homes, where she would not meet one of her own set, appealed to the holiday side of Helen's nature. At present she was on the war-path, and was longing to find out what the martial blood in the adjacent garrison town was doing in the way of mixing with the civilian social fluid.

"What regiments are in Plymouth now?" she asked languidly.

"I think the 'Lincoln Greens' are there, and the 'Fighting —th,' and the Marines; the Marines are always with us, you know," Mrs. Abbot explained, with the way of one who was not at all sure of the ground upon which she stood.

To the "Lincoln Greens" and the Marines Helen was profoundly indifferent. Those royal and gallant corps might have been at the bottom of the ocean or in the wilds of Siberia for all she cared. But her heart kindled, her eyes deepened and her face flushed into fresher youth and beauty at the sound of the "Fighting —th." That was his regiment. Ah! the mere mention of it made her feel that she was nearing him again.

"Do you know any of the men in any of those regiments?"

Carelessly as the question was asked, it struck Mrs. Abbot that Helen was more in earnest about it than she had been about anything since she entered Plym Tor.

"Several of the Marines; none of the others. Dolly can tell you more about them than I can. She

has been staying in Plymouth, and has met some of them several times."

"I don't fancy I should find any information Miss Abbot could give me very interesting. I know a man in the —th. Now, Lou, I shall spoil your dinner if you keep me from dressing any longer. By the way, have you an evening post out from here?"

"Not later than six, but I'm afraid it's long past that hour now. Stay, Helen, write it at once if you want to send a letter, and I'll give it to a girl who has been here sewing for me, and who goes back to Plymouth by the 8.50 train. She can post it for you."

Accordingly, the letter was written and conveyed to the sewing-girl. Miss Dolly Abbot happened to be inspecting the sewing when the letter was brought in. Curiosity, and the desire to obtain all sorts of information in indirect ways, were well-developed characteristics of hers. As soon as her aunt left the room, Dolly picked up the letter and read the address. "Oh! she knows *him*, does she!" the girl thought, with a slight accession of colour and a sparkle in her eyes that was not born of mirth or any pleasurable emotion; "she knows him, does she? Well! she shall hear that I know him too before we finish dinner."

Dolly Abbot had come out of her room considering her toilet complete for the evening. She now went back to her dressing-table, and took out from one of its drawers a little bunch of carefully pressed shamrock. This she pinned into the front of the pale blue silk blouse she was wearing. It would be easy to turn the conversation on to flowers and foliage. Her uncle always noticed what she wore. The shamrock would be sure to attract his attention, and when he asked her where she got it, she would be able to let fly an arrow well into the midst of Lady Roydmore's "overbearing pride and vanity," Dolly told herself.

The mere fact of having written to tell Captain Stafford that she was here had put Helen in the happiest spirits. She had no fear of getting the slightest

repulse. He would naturally be so delighted at the prospect of meeting one of his old set in these wilds, that, even if no softer feeling prompted him, he would be sure to come out and see her at once. And if it didn't rain, what opportunities she would have of long strolls with him alone through the lovely autumnal woods and by the winding river. Her satisfaction at this prospect made her beaming and brilliant. She always talked amusingly when she had an appreciative audience, and had something exciting to look forward to. This night she excelled herself, interested her host, and made her hostess feel quite proud of her. Only Dolly sat silent and unsmiling, and for silent, unsmiling Dolly, Lady Roydmore did not care one bit.

But during a pause, Dr Abbot, as Dolly had foreseen he would, caught sight of the sprig of shamrock and instantly asked,—

“Hallo, Dolly! where did you get your shamrock? I didn't know we had any growing about here.”

“It didn't grow about here, Uncle Tom. Captain Stafford gave it to me one day when we were having tea in his quarters. He is going to try and get me a four-leaved one, so that I may get *everything* I wish.”

For one instant, before she could control their expression, Helen's lovely eyes met those of Miss Dolly Abbot, and the latter knew the beautiful, fashionable woman, who seemed to think she could carry everything before her, was honouring her (Dolly) with a very hearty hatred, and a very angry suspicion. But Dolly looked quite placid and undisturbed, though she was thinking triumphantly, “So far, *I* have scored!”

CHAPTER III.

CAPTAIN STAFFORD ON DUTY.

As is the case with the village in which Plym Tor is situated, so it shall be with the barracks in which the Forty-blankth were quartered. To the best of the knowledge and belief of the chronicler of the histories of the people who figure in these pages, the model from whom Captain Stafford is very faultily drawn has never been in Plymouth in his life. Still, it is an unfortunate fact, and one with which all writers of fiction have to contend, that if real localities, barracks, or any other places are mentioned by name, discerning readers insist upon it that the characters which play their parts on these respective pages must really be drawn from the living people who are there, or who have been there, or who might have been there if something else hadn't happened, or who may be there in the future. Accordingly, it shall only be said that Captain Stafford's quarters were in extremely accessible and agreeable barracks, and that for unmarried quarters they were very superior indeed, for the reason that he was Field-Adjutant.

For some reason or other, Helen's letter, which should have reached him by the earliest morning post, was not delivered till the mid-day, and by that time he, having been on duty since six in the morning, had made arrangements for spending the afternoon.

It struck him as he opened the letter that there was a certain crinkled and muddled look about the adhesive part of it. But his own servants being above suspicion, he thought probably a shower had come on after the postman had taken it out of the bag, and had damped and sullied it. The next moment he was

reading the first words Helen had addressed to him since the night of the ball when Jane had so nearly won him. Knowing that nothing bores a man more than having the cross laid upon him of wading through a long letter, Lady Roydmore wisely made hers brief.

“MY DEAR HARRY,—I am staying here with an old schoolfriend. I find you are still in Plymouth. Come and see me if you can. To-day I am at home. I can hardly answer for my movements after to-day.—Yours very truly,

“HELEN ROYDMORE.”

That was all! Not a touch of sentiment, not an attempt to trade upon old times and burnt-out feelings. He almost stamped in his impatient vexation as he remembered that he could not get out to see her that day, in consequence of those other engagements he had made. Going to see Helen—for a certainty—meant hearing of Jane Herries again, and in spite of much that we know, and a great deal more that we do not know, he did long to hear of the girl whom he had held in his arms, and whose lips he had pressed for one beautiful minute.

“I’d chuck it if I dared,” he said to himself, speaking of his afternoon’s engagement, “but women are so infernally selfish and unreasonable!” From which it may be inferred that there was a lady in the afternoon case.

He grumbled to himself for half an hour over his inability to follow his inclination and “chuck his engagement,” but in the end he sent off a telegram to Lady Roydmore.

“On duty to-day—will call to-morrow,” was the message. Then a handsome pair of chesnut cobs came round in a four-wheeled dog-cart, and he soon forgot his temporary annoyance in the pleasure of sending two of the smartest steppers in Plymouth through Plymouth’s always overcrowded and frequently impassable streets.

He pulled up at the entrance to "The Royal," and going into the public drawing-room, was met by the same golden-haired girl who had made Jane jealous at the ball. There was nothing lover-like in their greeting, though ; on the contrary, there was something that savoured of the family jar in the way in which she greeted him.

"You're *more* than tiresome, Harry ; you have kept me waiting ten minutes. I am so glad I'm going away to-morrow—what a heaven Malta will seem after this damp hole. I shall tell Dick you haven't been half the attentive brother he promised you should be."

"My dear girl, if you had been my own wife instead of my brother's, I couldn't have given you more time than I have. I have given every moment I could get from those cursed barracks to you, and now you row me for not having done more."

"I won't row you a bit more, Harry dear." She was the sweet smiling sister-in-law again in a minute. "I want you to drive me out to see Dolly Abbot, will you?"

"I don't know the way."

"I do ; I used to go there when I was at school in Plymouth. Poor Dolly ; as I'm off to morrow, I must go and say good-bye to her."

Mrs. Dick Stafford omitted to say that she had received a telegram from Dolly, which the girl had got up at six, and walked three miles to deliver, saying,—

"Get Captain Stafford to drive you here—promise me—say you can't stop five minutes—take me back for night."

So, in unconsciousness of the difficulties that would presently environ him, Captain Stafford drove as directed by his sister, away to see Dolly Abbot.

Meanwhile, Dolly was gloating over the probable success of her plan of making Lady Roydmore bite the dust. She had always looked upon it as the one smile fortune had bestowed upon her, that a girl with whom she had been at school in Plymouth should

have come back as a young married woman, with a handsome brother-in-law in a regiment which happened to be quartered there at the time. Lily Stafford had always been kind in a half-lazy, half-patronising way to little "Dolly Abbot," whom she (Lily) nevertheless regarded as "sly," never reckoning that Dolly was clever enough to twist her (Mrs. Dick Stafford) round her fingers when she chose, and that she did choose to do so very often.

"She has such a dull life, poor child," the kind young matron would say to her brother-in-law; "just between ourselves, Harry, I don't think that aunt of hers treats her a bit too well. Poor Dolly never complains, but I can see by the way she clings to me, and dreads going home, that her home is anything but a happy one. She's as grateful as a child to you for having taken her for two or three drives, and for asking her to tea with me in your quarters."

"I never knew children were grateful; they take all they can get, want more, and blackguard you if you don't give it to them."

"Now, Dolly's not that type of child at all. She almost worships you for having given her so much pleasure." From which remark of Mrs. Dick Stafford's, it may be gathered that she was too loyal to implant her own suspicions of Dolly being sly in her brother-in-law's breast. The fact is, she thought, "I like having her with me while I'm here, and she never could be dangerous to Harry, so why need I bother about her little feigned innocencies and guilelessness. She *is* sly!—but she can't deceive me, and it won't hurt him if she does make eyes at him whenever my back is turned."

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Two or three times on their way out to the Abbots', Harry Stafford was on the point of telling his sister that his old friend Lady Roydmore was staying in the neighbourhood. Somehow or other, though, he did not do it. The subject never came up naturally,

or if it came up naturally, it was nipped just before it blossomed into flower by the necessity of giving all his attention to the chestnuts, who disliked narrow precipitous lanes, and objected to being backed half-a-mile downhill in order to let a clay cart, that rumbled like thunder, pass. Driving and riding were fine arts which Harry Stafford had cultivated to the highest possible degree—to such a degree that the horses he rode and drove became at once prouder of themselves and more alive to their responsibilities as part of the turnout, than they ever were in the hands of a lesser man. The chestnuts he was handling now were typical of unconquerable fiery force and untameable strength. Yet he conquered and tamed them with a hand that was light as a woman's, and that manipulated the reins with a woman's dainty grace.

"I wish you rode, Lily," he was saying to his sister, as they drove through the little street of the village where the Abbots lived. "I've got hold of a lovely little filly—a daughter of 'Blue Ruin's'—who would carry a woman who could tackle her wonderfully cleverly. *Why* don't you ride?"

"Because I can't, I suppose," she replied good-temperedly.

"But you ought to; it's one of the first duties of women——"

"Can Miss Herries ride?" she interrupted laughingly; "don't pretend to look as if you thought me mad, Harry. I wasn't quite blind that night at their ball when the poor old man died. I shall never forget that girl's look of anguish while you were looking at that ring Dick sent me; and her look of triumphant happiness when you left me for her was quite too pretty. Poor dear, she didn't know who I was, you see."

"She's an awfully nice girl, and she'll make a ripping good wife, whoever gets her," he said seriously.

"So she will, Harry; and I hope you'll get her. Oh, see! here is Dolly Abbot; do pull up."

There, indeed, was Miss Dolly Abbot, demurely

walking along the village street with letters in her hand to post. Her greeting of them was a masterpiece of surprised gratification.

"How could Captain Stafford have brought his lovely horses all that way, along those dreadful roads," she was beginning, when Mrs. Stafford cut in ruthlessly,—

"Jump up behind, Dolly, there's lots of room. I'm off to-morrow, you know; I'm come to say good-bye."

"Oh, Lily! when you go there will be nothing left worth living for."

"Try if I can't fill the vacuum," Stafford said lightly, turning, and to his surprise—a little to his dismay—Dolly's cheeks flushed like pink roses.

"I don't suppose I shall ever see *you* again, Captain Stafford; when Lily is gone, my days in Plymouth are numbered, and I'm not worth coming so far too see."

"You silly child," said Lily impatiently, "don't talk as if you were an imprisoned maiden, and Harry a royal prince who is too high and mighty to be approached."

Dolly's only answer was a deep resigned sigh, and as she brought this sigh to a conclusion they swept into the little carriage drive of Plym Tor.

Strolling up and down outside the drawing-room windows were Mrs. Abbot and Lady Roydmore. They both turned as they heard the carriage wheels. They were close to him as Captain Stafford pulled up his horses smartly, but for a moment he did not recognise Helen; the deep mourning disguised her in a measure. The next instant her cry of, "Harry, is it possible!" made his most vivid recollection of her come back with a bound, and as he sprang from the dog-cart and caught her hand, he had no thought of anything save how beautiful she was, and how awfully glad he was to see her again.

But Helen, though her pulses were galloping as fast, if not faster, than his, had the self-possession to

think of many things—how that odious Dolly Abbot came to be up in his dog-cart, and what had become of the duty which he had wired would detain him from her this day. It was clear he had not come here expecting to see her—his surprise and almost dismay had been too apparent for her to believe that for a moment. She shook hands hastily with Mrs. Stafford, whom she had known in London, and then turned back to him, determined to have the explanation out at once. But Dolly was too quick for her. Slipping up to him with her youngest and most innocent expression turned on, and in her quietest voice, Dolly said,—

“ Captain Stafford, do you remember what I told you about my tame sea-gull the other day? Well, its wing doesn’t get a bit better, I am afraid it must be broken; will you come and see?”

“ Oh! certainly!” he said politely. So Dolly, after shooting one little mocking glance at Lady Roydmore, led him away to a pasture at the back of the house, where there was a pond and a number of geese and ducks, as well as the sea-gull. There was a cow and a calf in the pasture too, and “ a pony that they let me ride sometimes when *no one* else wants him,” and a kennel with an old boar-hound chained to it. To all these dumb friends of hers the artless Dolly took a childish delight in introducing him. Each time he made a feint of returning to the house, she had something fresh which he must please to look at.

“ Lily won’t mind your being kind to me,” she pouted; “ and it doesn’t matter about the others.”

“ I must have a yarn with Lady Roydmore; she’s an old friend of mine,” he explained.

“ Is she? I am sorry; I should like all your friends to be mine, and she’s horrid.”

“ No, no, I won’t have you say that of her,” he said loyally. But Dolly only lifted one shoulder like a thwarted child, and pouted again, and made her blue eyes dim with tears, and repeated,—

“ But she is horrid; at least she’s horrid to me. I know, if you go and have a yarn with her, that you’ll

never speak to me again, and then I shall break my heart."

"You silly child," he said, putting his hand on her shoulder in order to reassure her possibly.

Then she brightened up and showed him another goose. Altogether, it was quite an hour before they returned to the house, and when they did so, Lady Roydmore was livid with a feeling to which she could give no name. It surely could not be "jealousy" of such "a designing little minx" as Dolly Abbot?

For no reason on earth—for he had merely indulged in a farmyard inspection—the ordinarily cool, *debonnair* soldier felt guilty and confused as he came into Lady Roydmore's presence.

In the meantime, Mrs. Stafford had, out of lazy good-nature, and without having the slightest idea that by so doing she had annoyed Lady Roydmore, whom she greatly admired, been playing the cards of her young friend Dolly very cleverly.

"I am leaving Plymouth to-morrow—going out to India to join my husband, you know, and I may not see Dolly again for many years. Will you let her come back and stay with me to-night, Mrs. Abbot? It would be such a pleasure to me."

Having it always well before her that poor Dolly was a homeless orphan, who must be treated with extra care and kindness on that account, Mrs. Abbot gave her consent warmly to the plan at once.

"Poor Dolly will miss you terribly," she said; "of course, if you wish to have her, she shall go back with you, and I will arrange about sending for her to-morrow."

Small wonder that, when she heard this arrangement made, Lady Roydmore grew livid.

But when Captain Stafford came in and sat himself down by her, she forgave him—woman-like—his share in the matter, and poured out the vials of her secret wrath on Dolly's head alone. "It had been the girl's doing"—she was right there—"that he had absented himself with her and made himself remark-

able, if not ridiculous." She would give him a word or two of warning which might be of use in his future dealings with a girl in whom she intuitively perceived the spirit of a born *intriguante*. So, rising and putting her hand on his arm, and smiling at him with more than the old tenderly seductive grace, she said,—

"Come and take a stroll in the garden, Harry. I have so many things to tell you. Jane is with Florence, you know."

"Don't be long, Harry," his sister cried after him as he was following his old love. "You know I have such a lot of packing to do to-night."

"All right!" he said; but when he got out into the garden, and Helen slipped her hand into his arm, he forgot his sister's orders; he forgot everything, in fact, saving that he had loved this woman desperately once, and that she was more fascinating and quite as good-looking as ever.

"So this was the 'duty' that kept you from coming to me, Harry," she began lightly—she was far too clever a woman to scold or reproach a lover who was wavering in the balance. "Well, all's well that ends well, and it has ended very well indeed, as we have met."

"You see, Lily is off to-morrow; I couldn't throw her over."

"Naturally you could not, any more than you can avoid driving Miss Abbot back to-day, as your sister has invited her. It strikes me as such an incongruous union between those two. Mrs. Stafford is such a perfect, exquisitely-mannered gentlewoman—but it goes without saying that she should be *that*; it would be *impossible* for a brother of *yours* to choose any other type of woman for his wife."

"Yes, Lily's all that," he assented. "May I smoke? thanks. Now for the other one; what about her type?"

"A very common one, Harry. Silent, to conceal ignorance of the majority of subjects that are dis-

cussed in public. Artless, to cover up the artifice which is the strongest element in her character. A girl who may end on the *pavé*, or in the peerage, for there are several weak young peers about. One, on the whole, who makes me thank Providence that I have no young brother who might be tempted by the little fox to hunt her. Am I right?"

"I really don't know," he said coldly. "I have not made an exhaustive study of the poor little girl's character."

She laughed.

"Nor have I; but it revealed itself to me in a flash. Do you know, Harry, I sometimes feel sorry that I see through and through people whether I wish to or not. I constantly have to avert my eyes from the faces of those who are speaking to me, because I don't want them to read in mine how fully their minds and motives are revealed to me."

"Perhaps it has been a good thing for you, Helen, that your mind and motives have not always been so clearly revealed to other people. Let little Dolly Abbot alone—she has nothing to do with us—and tell me what you have been doing with yourself since I saw you—and—where is Miss Herries?"

CHAPTER IV.

THE DUBIOUS NEUTRAL GROUND BETWEEN LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP.

"By Jove! I am sorry to hear Miss Herries is at The Court. Mrs. Graves will do her no good. Does she like being there?"

Helen shrugged her shoulders.

"It is some time since I heard from Jane. When she wrote last she seemed to be happy enough. There are some people called Penarth who appear

to keep the ball rolling, and Captain Salusbury was staying at The Court."

"Poor old Geof," Captain Stafford said heartily.

"Why expend pity on him? I suppose he's man enough to put an end to the intimacy both with the Penarths and Salusbury if he disapproves of it?"

"He's man enough to entirely trust the woman he loves and has married, and he makes a mistake in doing it."

"Well, we can't set the crooked matter straight. Tell me about yourself. Do you bore yourself very much at Plymouth?"

"Not a bit."

"I am sorry to hear it," she said, with petulant candour. "My appearance on the boards would have been ever so much more rapturously hailed if you had. Do you know, the mere prospect of talking to you again gave me keener pleasure than anything has given me since we parted. Think what the realisation must be to me, since the anticipation was so good!"

"You always knew how to flatter judiciously. I will be equally frank. Other people will seem very tepid to me after our pleasant *re-union*. You must come in and let me show Plymouth to you! When can you come? To-morrow? Lunch with me, and after luncheon I'll show you the Hoe, and the Devil's Point, and the Barbican. You'll see a bit of real life on the Barbican that will be a novelty to you."

"I will put myself entirely in your hands, and you shall show me what you please. I suppose Mrs. Abbot will send me in?"

"Didn't she say that her husband would be driving in to fetch Dolly? can't you come with him?"

She nodded a reluctant assent.

"You don't like the idea?"

"If he drives me in, he will probably think that he is in courtesy bound to devote himself to my service. I confess the idea does not smile upon me."

"Why shouldn't he lunch with us, he and Dolly?"

"You have lost all your tact as well as your taste," she retorted impatiently. "You see I dislike that girl. I admit she is unimportant to the last degree, and it is rather undignified on my part to own up to a dislike to her; but the fact is I never have stood upon my dignity where you are concerned, and I have always told you the truth. I dislike her as I dislike other creeping things—both small and great. If *she* is added to the attractions of the Hoe, the Devil's Point and the Barbican, you must carry out your programme unassisted by me."

Her impatient petulance did not displease him. She was looking strangely pretty, and more hurt than angry. After all, it was only womanly that she should wish to have him all to herself. There was nothing ill-natured or mean about her feeling towards Dolly Abbot. Her dislike to the girl was merely the offspring of her feeling for himself.

"I don't believe that I shall ever be able to carry out any programme unassisted by you, Helen," he whispered pressing her hand closer to his coat. "Get them to send you down to the train to catch the 12.50, and I will meet you at the Milbay Station. We shall then be perfectly independent, and I will drive you back here in the afternoon. Does this plan meet your views, Queen of my Soul?"

"If I were *that* in very truth, any and every plan you made would meet my views, Harry," she was saying, when a quick, light step on the gravel close behind them made them start and turn round to face Dolly.

"I am so sorry I startled you," that young lady began plausibly. "I made all the noise I could, but my feet are not very heavy, I am afraid. Captain Stafford, Lily has sent me to ask you if you mean to drive her back to-day? I *couldn't* help myself, I had to come."

She looked so wistful and anxious, so like a chidden child, that Captain Stafford forgave her with more effusion than was necessary, Helen thought.

“My dear Dolly, Lily couldn’t have sent a sweeter little messenger. It’s rather a joke you’re trying to make those fairy-like little feet make a row on the gravel.”

Miss Dolly received the compliment with down-cast eyes. Suddenly she raised them and shot a glance at Helen.

“How silly Lady Roydmore must think you, for she doesn’t know what *great* friends we have grown to be in the last few weeks, does she? You see,” she added, turning on the ingenuous stop with wonderful celerity for so young a hand, “you see, Lady Roydmore, till I met Captain Stafford no one had ever been kind to me; and he has been so *very* kind, that it’s no wonder that I——” She paused, and filled up the silence with a well-managed blush.

“Thank God that girl is not my daughter,” said Lady Roydmore to herself; and she added mentally, “And I should think her mother has reason to thank God that she is dead.”

Before Helen was out of her bedroom the following morning, she received the following telegram from Captain Stafford:

“Am sending a saddle-horse out for you. Hope you’ve brought your habit. You’ll see me at twelve.”

“He has not forgotten. He is giving me the greatest pleasure I can have,” she thought exultantly.

In the old, beautiful, bygone days, when first they had been lovers, these two had spent the best part of their time on horseback in each other’s company. She rode brilliantly but unpretentiously, pluckily and well. Her hands were as light as the proverbial feather, but her wrists were like little bars of steel, and her temper, where horses were concerned, was simply perfect. Added to these essential qualities she had a subtly-balanced seat, and one of those luxuriously developed figures, with length and slender-

ness of waist, which are so matchless in the saddle.

“How glad I am that I am not like Praed’s woman in the *Troubadour*—‘too cold to sing, too tall to dance ;’ that must mean that she was too tall to ride also. Some of those lines do fit me like a glove, though,” and she half murmured, half hummed the following rhymes as she went to her bath,—

“ She had seen six-and-thirty springs,
And still her blood’s warm wandering
Told tales, in every throbbing vein,
Of youth’s high hope and Passion’s reign,
And dreams from which that lady’s heart
Had parted ! or had seemed to part.
She had no wiles from cunning France,
Too cold to sing, too tall to dance ;
But yet, where’er her footsteps went
She was the Queen of Merriment.”

“I am all that, and can dance and ride into the bargain,” Helen thought triumphantly, as she sheathed herself in one of the plainest and smartest of habits it had ever been her fortune to have moulded on to her.

“Oh, dear ! I feel as if I should win him to-day ; but what’s the good of winning what one can’t keep ? I believe I feel something better ! I love him so, that I can give him up to Jane if he wants her, but never to a lesser woman than Jane—never ! never !”

“You solved the difficulty very prettily,” she said to him an hour later, when they were riding back to Plymouth together. “This dear little weedy, breedy chestnut is a charming substitute for Miss Dolly Abbot. Is she your own ?”

“Do you like her ?”

“So far, immensely.”

“Then she is yours.”

Lady Roydmore shook her head.

“You are too fond of scattering your gifts broadcast to the many : the few will never appreciate them while you do this.”

“You must have the mare, you *shall* have the mare,” he replied, becoming determined in propor-

tion as she opposed him. "She was bred and broke to carry you, you're a bit of her already. Come down into these meadows; there's a ripping jump, and she'll take it like a swallow. I want to see the habit in air over that."

"On one condition, Harry," she said, swerving slightly towards him, "I'll take her over anything *you* tell me to go at, and I'll take her to my heart of hearts as your gift if you'll promise me that I may give her to Jane the day Jane marries."

"A curious condition that!"

"A fanciful one, perhaps; but you must promise me that you'll let me fulfil it."

"Supposing she marries a man who doesn't know a mare from a mouse?"

He knit his brows and thought for a moment. Then he added, "I think I'll promise, for the day Jane marries will see me a married man."

"You're so curious, Harry; sometimes I think I know you, and sometimes——"

"I'm not worth thinking about," he interrupted. "And just know this,—

"I know that Folly's breath is weak,
And would not stir a feather,
But yet I would not have her speak
Your name and mine together."

"That means that you are afraid of compromising me, as you can offer no compensation if gossip is aroused," she said fearlessly. "Well, you are right, and you are doing the manly and generous thing in warning me. But understand that I take no heed of 'Folly's breath.' It can't injure me, however much it blows upon me. I value your friendship too much to surrender a bit of the display of it for any fanciful, prudential consideration. You ought to have understood that I have prepared myself for any event, however painful, when I told you that I would give the mare to Jane the day she marries."

She held her hand out to him steadily, but there

were tears in her eyes. It was easy enough to utter her renunciation, but it was hard to realise that he was ready to accept it. He took her hand and raised it to his lips, to the intense amazement and amusement of a farm-labourer, to whom such courtly courtship was as one of the occult arts.

"Sometimes I wish I had never seen Jane. It was your doing that I did so, and knowing her has unsettled me. Why did you try to arrange my life for me, Helen?"

He looked at her very tenderly as he asked this, and she understood the feeling that influenced him. He meant her to believe that if he had never met Jane, he would have allowed his old love for herself to re-ignite in his heart. But, as it was, he had met Jane, and the memory of Jane stood between them.

"Jane is free, so are you! why do you procrastinate and give her time to contrast your indifference with the devotion of other men? If you were really honestly in love with her, you would tell her so."

"The fact is, I like and admire Miss Herries more than I ever— No, I won't say *more* than I ever liked a woman before, but certainly as much. But I suppose I like my freedom even better. The prospect of settling down to a humdrum, domestic routine, with one woman for my constant companion day and night, appals me. I know myself pretty well, and I know that I should get sick of Venus herself if she became monotonous; and how on earth can a woman avoid becoming monotonous when she has to trot round the same little domestic circus day after day, and know that so it will go on so long as you both do live."

"If you were as much in love with Jane as you once were with—some one else, the dread of being bored by her wouldn't deter you from matrimony."

"I was an awful young fool in the days when I was so much in love with 'some one else,' that I would have risked anything for her. You're a dear, clever, sweet, beautiful woman, Helen, but if you

were my wife at this present moment, I shouldn't find you half so entertaining, and you wouldn't be half so well pleased to ride through these solitudes with me. We have actually amused each other so well that we've forgotten the purpose for which we came into the meadows, and passed the water-jump. Give her her head as soon as she catches sight of it; you couldn't hold her away from anything if you tried, so it's just as well not to try. There's nothing so perfect as you are on horseback, excepting Ariadne on her panther. The mare must remain your possession for ever. Whatever happens, you must keep Makehaste."

"You withdraw your permission for me to give her to Jane the day Jane marries!"

"I do. Jane would never become her half as well as you do. You would lead a cavalry charge splendidly, and yet there is nothing of the Amazon about you. Let her go."

The last bit of instruction was quite superfluous. Makehaste had caught sight of the paling, with the brook beyond it, and had gone before Captain Stafford could speak. Then for an hour they amused themselves, and made the world a Paradise to their horses by steeple-chasing towards Plymouth, Helen riding as she had rarely ridden before, under the subtly-pleasant influence of the conviction she had that she was riding herself back into his vacillating heart.

He felt very proud of her. Being only a man, and not a superhuman monster it did gratify him greatly, as they rode through the town, to see that other men, who were excellently good judges both of women and horses, had evidently no fault to find either with Makehaste or her rider. While as for Lady Roydmore herself, her heart bounded as exultantly in her breast as the bounding, bonnie chestnut beneath her, when he lifted her out of the saddle in the hotel yard.

"It may be evanescent, but for the moment I occupy the upper story of his heart," she was thinking, while he was saying,—

"If life could be all riding, I'd ride through it with you, Helen. Now I'll charter a hansom and take you round the ancient town, and show you where Drake and Hawkins played bowls and talked in epigrams when the Spanish Fleet hove in sight."

They followed out the programme pretty nearly as he had written it. For an hour they looked at the sea, and were nearly blinded by the glare on the Hoe. Then they went down to the Barbican, where Helen tried to find traces of Baring Gould's wonderful little heroine, Joanna in "Court Royal."

"Du Maurier must have been here for his model of the Jew, but I don't see any girl as pretty and picturesque as Joanna," she was saying, as they threaded their way back on foot through some of Plymouth's most noisome slums. A minute afterwards they emerged into Bedford Street close by St. Andrew's Church, and all signs of slumminess had vanished.

"Here comes a very pretty and picturesque little specimen of a Devonshire girl," he replied, laughing a little maliciously as he pointed out Dolly Abbot, who tripped to meet them with a touching air of surprise and innocence that was contradicted by her first words, spoken in an audible aside to Captain Stafford.

"Oh! Captain Stafford, I hope you won't be *very* angry with me for not having waited for you as I promised, but I had some shopping to do for my aunt, and you know if I forget any of her commissions I have a pleasant time of it."

"Did you promise to wait for me? I don't remember."

"Then I'll never wait for you again, as you forget so quickly," she answered sadly, and she managed to make her eyes look as if there were some unshed tears in them. And though Helen felt sure that no such promise had either been given or accepted, she felt annoyed.

"I am going to take Lady Roydmore back to have some tea at my quarters. You must come too, Dolly——"

“ Perhaps Lady Roydmore would rather I didn’t come,” Dolly interrupted timidly, on which Lady Roydmore glanced at her with such careless disdain that the ingenuous little lady made up her mind to let a poisoned arrow into the woman of the world’s peace of mind some day. But Captain Stafford believed in the ingenuousness, and answered in good faith,—

“ Oh, nonsense! Lady Roydmore wants you to come as much as I do.”

“ Then you don’t want me very much,” the innocent Dolly whispered. “ Thank you, Captain Stafford,” she said aloud, “ but my uncle will be waiting for me, and I am ‘ only Dolly,’ you know, and have to give up to other people always.”

Helen only *heard* the words that were spoken aloud, but she understood the purport of Dolly’s whisper as thoroughly as if the girl had raved it out in stentorian tones.

“ If he can stoop to entangle himself in a web that *such* a girl as Miss Dolly Abbot can spread, he isn’t worth a thought even from *me* ; while as for Jane, how can he dare to pretend to love her, while he permits himself to be the familiarly treated half-friend, half-lover of such an underbred syren as this local Vivien ! ” thought the hardened woman of the world, in a fit of honest, generous, jealous rage against the minor power who was inveighing Captain Stafford to dance to her piping in a garish, vulgar light. Her whole thought was for him in the matter. His honour, his happiness, his welfare. These all must suffer, must be lowered at least, she felt intuitively, if in sheer, careless kind-heartedness he let this girl coil herself around him and his career. “ But if I interfere he will think I am jealous! So I am ; not jealous of her, but for him ! It’s so hard, though, to mark the difference. I would bless Jane for beating me out of the field if she would crush this little snake at the same time.”

These thoughts had coursed through her mind so

rapidly that Dolly was only a stone's throw from them when she said,—

“I have altered my mind about having tea with you to-day. The mare must be rested by this time, and I want to get back and think.”

“You're annoyed with me for being kind to that little Dolly. She is just that, a ‘little dolly,’ who claims kindness from men because she is such a poor, little, dear, unworldly child. There is something quite pathetic in the way in which she shows gratitude to me for the most ordinary civility.”

“If she showed gratitude to her uncle and aunt for their most extraordinary kindness I should think better of her. As it is—well, whatever I say you will misunderstand me, so I had better say nothing, excepting that I wish with all my heart that Jane Herries were here. You say you shrink from facing life with her for fear you should find it monotonous. What would you find it with a creature that is half-fox and half-serpent?”

“How awfully unjust even a clever woman can be when she gets a fad against another woman into her head! The girl hasn't a thought of hooking me, or any man. She's as fresh as a daisy, shows her likes and dislikes with child-like openness and simplicity, and is——”

“My favourite aversion at present, so we won't speak of her any more after to-day. I only hope her ‘child-like’ candour, openness and simplicity will not lead you on to write any kind-hearted effusions to her. You're apt to say more than you mean exactly when you take a pen in your hand. And to such a loving, grateful ‘child’ as Dolly Abbot, you might perhaps open your heart a little too freely on paper some unlucky day.”

“If I ever get into a scrape I'll come to you to help me out of it; you don't mind hard hitting.”

“You don't know how hard I can hit in a cause I have at heart, and as I have your happiness and welfare very much at heart, I shall deal the hardest blows

I can when I see either assailed. Now you may ride a little way homewards with me, but I won't take you all the way, or you will be late for mess."

"Never mind dinner," he said, very much as if he meant it. But at the same time he thought her very considerate to remember it. Accordingly, when he had accompanied her a mile out of the town, and the country road leading to Plym Tor stretched out straight before her, he took leave of her, promising to come out and call again in a day or two.

So Helen rode on alone, feeling satisfied that, if she had not gained much ground with him to-day, that at least she had not lost any. Feeling also that though she had given him to understand that though she would be no barrier between him and Jane Herries, there would be war to the knife between herself (Helen) and any lesser woman who should enter the lists for his heart and hand against her.

And he rode back alone, thinking what a charming, versatile companion she was, and how good-looking and plucky in the saddle. Thinking, too, how pleasant it was that for some time to come he should be able to have that companionship and contemplate those good looks whenever he pleased, and with a delicious sense of freedom, thinking that he could get away from her whenever he liked. Undoubtedly a friend had a great advantage over a wife; or rather a man who had succeeded in forming a strong and intimate friendship with an attractive woman had a great advantage over the man who won her for his own."

His reflections were suddenly interrupted by a voice saying,—

"Oh, Captain Stafford, I am so glad to meet you—I didn't think the road was *half* as long. I'm dead tired already."

"How came you here, Dolly?—walking! where is your uncle?"

"He had to go a round of visits, so, as I hate waiting outside in the dog-cart, I said I'd walk out to the station, and he could pick me up as he passed.

But it is such a long way, and so lonely, and I am so tired."

She looked so young and innocent, with two bright spots caused by fatigue and excitement on her little face, that he had not the heart even to blame her to himself for this obvious attempt to waylay him. On the contrary, he dismounted, lifted her into his saddle, turned his horse round, and with the words,—

"I'll take you back to the station ; hang on tight, or you'll be over on the offside."

She was slipping about uneasily, and was horribly frightened, but she would have ridden a unicorn if he had led it for her, in order that she might have the felicity of vaunting the fact by-and-by to Lady Roydmore. Still, when she stole a glance at him presently, she was less elated. He was looking very grave, almost cross. The fact was, that the shades of evening were falling fast, and he was feeling that he might as well have made himself late for the mess-dinner for Helen's sake as for the sake of this local flirt.

"I think, if you would let me put my hand on your shoulder, I could keep on better," she murmured, putting a nervous, appealing tremble into her voice. So along the rest of the road to the station he trudged in the gathering gloom, with Miss Dolly Abbot leaning rather heavily on his shoulder.

CHAPTER V.

WORSE THAN WIDOWED.

THERE came a day when Florence Graves—having pawned not only all her own jewellery, but all Jane's, having borrowed every penny of her sister's small capital, and persuaded her to draw the next quarterly instalment of her income in advance, having quarrelled with her husband till he almost lost sight of the graceful blonde he had married, and saw in her

only an excited virago—told herself that things had come to such a desperate pass that she might as well fling free of all restraint and bound over the border altogether.

She had in her possession several letters from Captain Salusbury, in which he had repeated what he had often told her verbally, namely, that “if she were a free woman he would gladly, proudly, ardently and immediately lay himself and everything he possessed at her feet.” She was not a free woman, but the law could make her one if she only acted with vigour and determination. The game was played out at The Court. Geoffrey had sold hunters, carriage-horses, pictures, plate, all and everything, in fact, that had conduced to her happiness and glory. The prospect before her was insufferably dull. The Penarths having used her as a cork-jacket to float them into the better set, now offered her the cold shoulder. The Graveses and their friends reproached her with having ruined the family, and Jane’s presence was a perpetual sting to her.

“I’ll end it all and go,” she thought one day, and the uncertainty that hung about the results of her contemplated action aroused all the gambling spirit within her.

She left no word of parting for those from whom she was flying, nor did she send a word of warning to the one to whom she was going. She just dressed herself in a plain walking costume, and went down to catch a mid-day train to town. The contents of her purse just covered her first-class fare—she had no intention of denying herself any luxury; he could pay for it.

He was out when she reached the hotel at which he was staying, but this in nowise discomposed her. She requested to be shown to his private room, and ordered tea. It amused her to find several photographs of other pretty women strewn about, but it did not annoy her. He had often sworn, verbally and on paper, that if she were free he would become

her legal property with pride. Well, now she had made herself free, and she had his letters in her pocket.

It was nearly eight o'clock before she heard his voice coming along towards the door of the room, in eager and excited conversation with other men. Then the door was thrown open, and he swung into the room, followed for a step by the other men.

She had risen, and was advancing smilingly to meet him, but his first words, and the way in which the other men fell back, checked her.

"Good God, Florence! what madness is this? Alone! here! Let me take you back at once, or rather send you back."

"Send me back! Where? I have no home, and I never mean to see my husband again," she said determinately, reseating herself. "I have come to *you* for good; you have often said—and written—what you would do if I were free. Well, I have made myself free, and I have come to you."

"You have not run away?"

"Not at all. I walked to the station and took the express train on. I couldn't bear my life any longer, so I have come to put it into your keeping. You have often said——"

"Your madness will ruin me as well as yourself," he interrupted. "Thank heaven I'm under orders to sail in three days for India to rejoin the second battalion. Do you see now what you have done?"

"I'll go with you," she declared, with the hardihood of despair.

"And so ruin me altogether, and get me kicked out of the service. Come, let me do the only thing I can for you—send you to some friend's house, and wire in your name to your husband that you came up to do some shopping, and will be back to-morrow."

"I have no money left; nothing with me but what I have on," she whimpered disappointedly. "You often said I was the love of your life."

"I never hinted that I would bolt with you," he interrupted; "it would be suicidal! I should be ruined, you would be scouted, and we should both be heartily sick of each other in a week. Make the best of your own mistake. Go back, leave me before the manager of this hotel sniffs mischief and requests you to leave. For your own sake, go!"

"And this is man's love!" she said bitterly.

"It's the best I have to offer you. How would you be bettered if I dragged you and your name through the mud? I tell you you would be as sick of me in a few weeks as you are of your husband, and I should probably hate you for having blasted my career and ruined me."

"Why don't you send in your papers; then you wouldn't be ruined."

"Leave the service that I love ten times better than I could love any woman, just when I've a chance of being in for something good in the fighting line in India? No, no."

She threw herself back in her chair and burst into an uncontrollable fit of weeping that was simply awful to him. Supposing any one should hear her? Supposing any one of the men who had been arrested on the threshold by her presence should have recognised her? He hated her for her reckless selfishness, but while she wept so stormily she had him in her power.

"I will do anything you like, in reason, if you'll only come out of this. I have a married sister who will do what I ask her, without asking you any questions. Let me take you there at once."

But Florence was enraged and obstinate.

"If you make me leave you; if you turn me out, I don't care what becomes of me," she muttered.

"Why didn't your conscientious scruples stop you from writing me all the lies you have written." Then she harked back to her former declaration—that he "had promised to lay his heart, hand and fortune at her feet, if she were only free."

“There it is,” he urged ; “you are *not* free.”

“Geoffrey will divorce me now, and make me free.”

“And in freeing you, will ruin me. I shall be dismissed the service, or have to leave compulsorily. I shall be run for hideous damages, and—well, *ruined*—that is the long and the short of it, and all for a woman with whom I’ve never had, and never will have, other than friendly relations. Come, Mrs. Graves,” he added, with a sudden severe impatience that impressed her, “I am not going to let appearances play your game, and ruin me by staying here like a rat in a hole. I shall leave this hotel, and go back to my quarters at Aldershot. I can catch the cold-meat train still, unless you’ll let me escort you to my sister’s, and promise me that you will go back to The Court to-morrow.”

She rose up, crying piteously, and made one more effort to subjugate him. Casting herself upon his breast, wreathing her arms closely round his neck, she drew his head down and pressed her lips to his.

“Oh, I love you so, I love you so,” she moaned.

“I know I am selfish, weak, wicked, ungrateful, reckless—everything that it’s bad for a woman to be—but I love *you*. Yes, I do ; better than any better woman will ever love you. The mere touch of your hand sends every drop of blood leaping like fire through my veins. I would give up everything else in which I have taken pleasure if I could be with you always.

Everything seems grey and cold and dull when you are not near me. I would rather bear hard words from you than listen to the softest and kindest that any other man can speak. Don’t send me away. I shall eat my heart out with longing for you if you do. Let me go out to India as a stranger to you, and meet you there. I will change my name ; I’ll have my death put in the papers ; I’ll throw every one who knew me in my old life off the scent. No one will suppose that you have anything to do with me. I will be so cautious, so very cautious, that you will not be ruined. Only let me know that you are mine,

and that you look upon me as yours, for I love you so, I love you so !”

He would have been more or less than man if he had not pressed kisses back upon the lips that were imploring him to help her on to destroy them both so wildly. He did kiss her, desperately and passionately, but he kept his head, and before Florence knew what he was doing he had sent for a cab, and was on his way with her to his sister's house.

That lady was a little interested, but not at all inquisitive. She received all his directions in silence, and then promised to obey them.

“She has been a fool, I suppose, and thought you meant all you said. Poor thing, I'll see her off to-morrow, and wire to the husband in her name. She will have come to her senses by the morning.”

“She loves me awfully,” the brother said in reply, “be kind to her ; she has only been indiscreet, but no one will ever know anything about it if you do as I tell you.”

“It's a mercy for you that you are off so soon. Poor woman. You are a very nice fellow, my dear boy ; but what in the world can she see in you to make her ready to damage herself for you ?”

There came a passing look of something like shame and contrition on his face as his sister spoke.

“I wish I could think it was only vanity and love of excitement that made her want to throw herself on my protection. But it's more than that. She loves me, and I'm afraid I've embittered her life.”

“Oh, she'll get over it when she doesn't see you, dear !” his sister rejoined hopefully ; “there is nothing in the world like absence for making the heart grow fonder of some one else !”

Which comforting remark had not at all the effect upon Captain Salusbury which his sister intended it to have. His memory, on the contrary, was rather delighted to linger on the passionate tones in which Florence had told him, “I love you so ! I love you so !”

The next day Mrs. Graves, very considerably tamed, and feeling rather dubious as to her reception, went back to The Court.

The telegram had been received, and Jane was at the station to meet her. Jane, with a very pale face and a very frightened aspect. For a minute Florence's heart fell down to fearful depths as she thought that, "after all, she had been found out, and had better have stayed away," crossed her mind. The next moment Jane's first words reassured her on her own account, but gave her such a shock of approaching evil that she burst into a flood of the first tears of penitence and sorrow for another person which she had ever shed in her life.

"Oh ! Flo, *poor* Flo !" Jane began, in a piteously pathetic voice, "I'm so glad you are home again. There is something dreadful the matter with Geoffrey ; the doctor thinks he has gone mad. I oughtn't to have told you so suddenly ; perhaps he may recover ; poor, *poor* Flo !"

As the sisters drove home, the young wife realised that this was no excited overstatement on her sister's part. Every one they met looked at her with more respectful sympathy than she had ever received in that neighbourhood before. It was clear that whatever had upset poor Geoffrey Graves' not very strong brain, there was no suspicion of her conduct being a factor in the case. On further inquiry she found that he had never even been conscious of her absence. He had been brought home on the previous afternoon by some farm labourers who had found him wandering about in the fields without his hat ; and after a long period of maniacal frenzy he had sunk into a state of lethargy for some hours. From this he had emerged to pass into one of gibbering imbecility, which was declared to be the worst stage of all.

It was some time before they could persuade Florence to go into the room and try the effect of her presence on the man who had loved her so faithfully, if foolishly, and whom she had ruined. She shrank

from what she might see, conjuring up visions of the fearful personal change that might have come over him; and when at length she was half led, half carried into the room, the reality was far worse than her anticipation. The strong young man looked shrunken, old, pallid, haggard to a hideous degree. The mania must have been working its mischief in his mind and frame for many a weary day, the specialist who was speedily brought down by Lord Roydmore told them. From the first the case was pronounced hopeless, and preparations were made to remove him with as little delay as possible to a private asylum.

When she heard this, Florence felt a mountain weight removed from her heart. Whatever the trouble had been which had developed the latent mania, it had not been the knowledge that she had been false and frail enough to run away from him to seek the protection of another man. She felt almost virtuous and self-satisfied as she reflected on how she had been preserved from the last step, the final, fatal fall, by the drastic measures which Captain Salusbury had taken for her rescue from the peril into which he was not quite innocent of having drawn her. It was very sad and pitiful, of course, that Geoffrey should have come to such an untimely end, as far as real "life" was concerned. "But," as she kept on assuring her brother, "she was blameless in all respects, excepting in the matter of having been a little extravagant; and poor Geof had never exerted any authority over her expenditure."

"I don't want to hit you now you're down, Flo," Roydmore had replied, "but you'll have to look to your ways and means pretty sharply now. You've made ducks and drakes of the property, I hear from your mother-in-law. What do you propose doing?"

"You'll help me, Jack? Surely you'll help me?" she asked wistfully.

Roydmore looked grave.

"In a few weeks I shall not be a free agent, Flor-

ence. A marriage has just been arranged between myself and a Miss Levison. She will bring all the dollars into the firm, and her father will take jolly good care that I shan't have a chance of squandering them unless *she* pleases."

"Jewess, I suppose?" Florence remarked.

"Yes, and a very handsome one. I have done a very good thing for myself——"

"But you won't be able to hold out a helping hand to an erring sister?" Florence said bitterly.

"Well, as usual, I shall fall back on Jane; she will stay with me——"

"And you will spend her income?"

"She will share my home," Florence told him, with as much dignity as her desperate and depressed condition allowed her to assume.

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But Jane, when the case was put before her with much grace and pathos by beautiful, young, harassed Mrs. Graves, would do nothing of the sort.

"You must take it all, poor Flo," she said. "Think, there will be the three hundred a year which you will have to pay for Geoffrey, and the other three hundred will help you to live on here in your own home till a brighter time comes. There are no debts? You don't owe anything now, do you?"

"No," Florence promptly assured her, "there were no debts, unless poor Geoffrey had any of which she knew nothing."

Jane waved off that idea impatiently.

"So you shall live on here, and rouse yourself to lead a nobler life than the one you have been leading."

The girl trembled at her own audacity as she said this, but Florence listened, startled and surprised.

"I have always liked the idea of being forced to help myself, and take care of myself," Jane went on; "and I think," she added frankly, "that if you feel that I have given up everything I can for you and to

you, that you won't *waste* my sacrifice, Florence—that you will use it well.”

“I can't take it. I won't take it,” Florence declared with energy ; but the next moment she was asking, “If I *did* the only thing left for me to do, and accepted your offer, what would you do, Jane? Not that you will be driven to such an extreme measure as *work*. Roydmore would never hear of that.”

“But Roydmore's wife will, I fancy,” Jane laughed. “Don't think that I shall be easily influenced away from my intention. I am sick of the shadows in the life I've been leading since we left dear old Bath. I want to do something for myself and other people. I want to feel that I am not wasting every minute of the life God has given me. I want to *work*, and forget a trouble that I more than half created for myself.”

“If it's for your own good that you are resolved upon this course, it would be wrong, *very wrong* indeed, of me to thwart you,” Florence acquiesced emotionally. “I have not done so much good myself in life that I should try to stop another, and that other my own dear sister, from doing it.”

“I am glad you think I am right,” Jane said calmly, with just a tiny touch of sarcasm.

The time was past when Florence could either deceive or control Jane. Florence's soulless selfishness was patent to her younger sister. Florence's deceptions were abhorrent to the franker and more fearless nature of the girl who still loved Florence well enough to be ready to make any sacrifice for her.

“Besides,” Florence went on animatedly, becoming quite cheery at the improved prospect of her pecuniary affairs, “there is another reason for my accepting the use of your income, Jane. Heaven could never have intended that a parent should leave one daughter more than the other. Poor papa's soul will be more likely to know peace when you carry your dear kind offer into effect. And another reason still is that it will stop the censorious mouths of that awful

Mrs. Graves and her daughters in a great measure. They would have chattered enough if I had not been able to pay for poor Geoffrey being in that asylum. It's a dreadful thing for such a young woman as I am to have an insane husband who may live for years, the doctors all say; but it would give them such a handle for talking if I had not paid his expenses. Roydmore must be very poor-spirited to let those Levisons stamp all natural affection and consideration for his own sisters out of him. But thanks to you, you dear, kind, sensible thing, I shall not be compelled to crawl like a pauper to their gates."

"You will religiously defray all poor Geoffrey's expenses before you spend a penny on anything else—promise me that, Flo!"

"Of course I shall," Florence cried glibly, giving the promise without hesitation, and intending to keep it if quite convenient to herself.

"And she never thought once of asking me how or where I meant to try and make a living for myself," Jane thought, as alone that night, tossing about in weary sleeplessness, she recalled that interview with her worse than widowed sister, and tried to chalk out a path in the wilderness of her own future, along which her untutored inexperienced step might travel safely and honourably.

"I have it!" she thought at length, jumping up and striking a light. "I will write to Lady Roydmore; she has heaps of friends, and may put me in the way of doing something. She can't be jealous of me now; after all this time, she must see as plainly as I do that she never had need to be jealous of me."

In the morning Florence told her that she (young Mrs. Graves) had come to the conclusion that it would be more prudent for her to let The Court for two or three years than to live in it.

"I have made up my mind to go into lodgings at some seaside place for some months, and to break up this establishment at once—as soon as you are gone, in fact," she added; and Jane told her,—

"I posted a letter to Lady Roydmore this morning. As soon as I get her answer, I will fix the day I go."

"Written to Lady Roydmore! Well, I marvel at you, Jane. If it hadn't been for that horrible Helen, we should both have been very well off."

"Helen has a kind heart," Jane said curtly.

"A *very* kind one for handsome Captain Stafford! Don't imagine that she will rob him of any to bestow it on you, who so nearly rivalled her with him once," Florence sneered, and Jane shrank and crimsoned as if she had received a blow in the face. To her there was something infinitely coarse in speaking of a love that had never been declared, and about which she had never permitted herself to speak. "But poor Flo does not know what love is," the girl thought compassionately.

CHAPTER VI.

"KISS ME, YOU DARLING."

LADY ROYDMORE received Jane's letter of application for help in her attempt to make a living for herself at an auspicious moment. Captain Stafford was coming out in a few hours to ride with her, and Dolly Abbot was "not in that act," for one reason because she had no horse, and for another because she could not have ridden it had she possessed one.

It was a straightforward, honest appeal for aid; in fact it was exactly "like Jane," and Helen read it with a kindly feeling of pity for the girl whom, she felt sure, was doing penance for some sins that were not her own. It went straight to the point without any attempt at fine writing, without prevarication, without verbosity.

"DEAR LADY ROYDMORE,—For my father's sake, as he was very kind to you, will you try among your

friends to get me some sort of a situation where I can live for a few years, while my money is wanted for something else?—Yours very truly,

“JANE HERRIES.”

“The necessity for Jane’s finding a situation has arisen out of something to do with that wretched Florence, I’m sure of that,” Helen said impatiently, handing the note to Mrs. Abbot as she spoke. “Poor child! I wish I *could* help her, with all my heart.”

“Help her with all your head,” Mrs. Abbot answered, handing back the note. “Have her to live with you, of course.”

Lady Roydmore shook her head and blushed.

“She wouldn’t do it, Lou, even if I wished it, which I don’t. I have had to carve my own career out of very hard materials, and I tell you candidly that a step-daughter would be in the way of my following out that career successfully. Besides, Jane Herries is too independent-spirited to accept what she would consider a favour at any one’s hands. I suppose I must run up to town and see if I can get her something that she *can* take. I know any number of people, and I’m pretty popular. But it’s a ghastly shame that that poor girl should have been cheated out of her money by that unscrupulous little gambler Mrs. Graves.”

Mrs. Abbot thought for a few moments, then she said,—

“It will be harder for her—more painful to her, I mean—to be in a subordinate position, in a situation of any sort in London, where every one will know that she is the ‘Honourable Jane Herries,’ than it would be in the country, where her name would tell no tales, would it not?”

“Infinitely harder, and more painful for *me* also.”

“Then let her come here and teach my children. I will give her a mother’s care while she needs it. Have you anything to say against it, Helen?”

“Nothing,” Lady Roydmore said slowly; but as

she remembered Captain Stafford's proximity, she felt very strongly indeed against the proposed plan.

"Then write, ask her to come at once while you are with us," the warm-hearted woman went on.

"I want my children to be taught at home for the next three or four years, and I am sure Miss Herries will find them very easy to teach; and her manners will be such an example to them. Do let it be so, Helen. Let her come."

"I can't answer for her attainments, please to remember. She may be moderately well educated, or she may be as ignorant as your children are themselves at present."

"Why, don't you like my plan, Helen?" Mrs. Abbot asked impulsively.

"Indeed, pray don't suppose for a moment that I am averse to it; only I don't want to foist her upon you without warning you that she may be utterly inefficient."

"She will be such a nice companion for Dolly, too. I often feel how dull it must be for that poor girl out here in this place without a girl friend."

"I don't think she will find a girl friend in Jane Herries," Lady Roydmore said sharply. "However, I am bound not to stand in her way, so I will write to her if you wish it."

Mrs. Abbot wished it very much indeed; accordingly Helen wrote offering Jane the situation of governess to Mrs. Abbot's children, in the most unattractive terms she could command. And Jane, it may as well be stated at once, accepted the offer.

By the time the letter was written, Captain Stafford had arrived, and Helen's chestnut was at the door, as was also Dolly, expending many caresses and words of endearment upon Captain Stafford's horse.

"Kiss me, you darling. Captain Stafford, make him kiss me like he did the other day, when I had been riding him," Dolly cooed, just as Lady Roydmore appeared on the scene; "he is such a dear, satin-nosed darling."

“Take care he doesn’t bite you,” the satin-nosed darling’s master replied a little ungraciously.

Helen knew nothing of that ride through the quiet lanes in the twilight which poor little nervous and fatigued Dolly had achieved through much scheming, and he had no great desire that the first account of it which Lady Roydmere received should be edited by Dolly.

“Oh, he won’t bite me; I believe he remembers me. He carried me so quietly, I think he knew I should slip if he fidgeted; for I had nothing to hold on by but Captain Stafford’s shoulder, you know, Lady Roydmere.”

Miss Dolly spoke in her most engagingly child-like tone, and with her most ingenuous manner, but Lady Roydmere felt the sting which both tone and manner affected to conceal. She reared her perfectly proportioned head up more proudly as she passed on to the side of her mare, where Captain Stafford was standing in readiness to give her a hand up, and never a sign did she make, by look or word, of having felt Dolly’s little poisoned pin prick.

But Dolly had a great gift of spiteful pertinacity. It may be urged, in partial extenuation of her cultivation and proficiency in this quality, that the world had been a harsh teacher to her. She hated poverty, obscurity, and the necessity for exerting herself in the slightest degree for the performance of uncongenial duties and work. These being her sentiments, she was in a continual state of friction about the poverty, obscurity and compulsorily useful tasks which were her daily portion. Her uncle and aunt were kind to her. They gave her a home, food and raiment as freely as if she had been their own daughter. But they sometimes expected her to look after the welfare of the baby, and to sew on buttons to some of the family garments. Dolly disliked babies as much as she did sewing on buttons; accordingly she considered herself as much misapplied as is a piece of cloth of gold patched on to a

fustian coat. And this sense of being superior to and altogether incongruous with her surroundings made her spiteful to any one who interfered with what she fancied was a possibility of escaping from them.

Such a possibility was faintly defining itself before her mental vision now. Captain Stafford had shown her kindness and a good deal of courteous attention, and she was ignorant of the fact that he showed precisely the same meed of these things to every woman and girl who pleased or attracted him at all. Dolly had pleased and attracted him up to a certain point. He liked his horses to bend their necks and step higher in proud gratitude when he petted them. This girl, who was scarcely more than a child, pleased him by her apt display of the quality he appreciated even in his horses. He was not in love with her, or fascinated by her, or even, as he would have termed it himself, "fetched" by her. But he liked her for her youth and her pretty looks, and her apparently artless exhibition of liking for himself. And Dolly, who was well read in that school of literature in which, youth and beauty in obscurity is eventually invariably rewarded by making a brilliant marriage with a man who has exhausted all the pleasures of court and camp, saw no reason why she should not fulfil the usual destiny by the aid of Captain Stafford.

Lady Roydmore's appearance on the boards, and Lady Roydmore's calm resumption of what had evidently been a great intimacy, had been disgusting to Dolly. So disgusting and so exasperating, that to foil Lady Roydmore became the first, and to sting and annoy Lady Roydmore the second, object of her life. Dolly had the rare but invaluable power of portraying the most exalted and pure emotions facially, simultaneously with the utterance of the most malignantly malicious words. She possessed also the gift of so burying or concealing the sting in language, that only the one who was meant to feel

it knew that it was there. For example, neither Mrs. Abbot, nor Captain Stafford himself, felt that there was anything heinous or deserving of capital punishment in her allusion to having leant upon his shoulder in order to maintain her balance on his horse. But Lady Roydmore knew that the allusion was carefully prepared, flavoured and seasoned for her special delectation, and though she was not a homicidally disposed woman, she would not have signed a petition to the Queen, praying for a respite, had Dolly's slender neck been in danger of the gallows at that moment.

She stood now on the lower step of the porch, her arms uplifted, her hands clasped behind her head, her fair little face looking rather sad as she watched, with wistful eyes and parted lips, the smart, neat way in which Lady Roydmore settled to the saddle, while Captain Stafford drew her habit into place. She had eliminated every trace of the envy and jealousy which was gnawing her soul from her expression.

"Pretty little Dolly! poor little Dolly! it's deuced hard for her not to be able to come with us," Harry Stafford thought, as he turned round to mount his own horse, and caught Dolly's eyes fixed upon him pleadingly.

It was such a lingering, loving glance, and it was given to him so stealthily, that for the first time it occurred to him that this "child" had grown beyond childish things, and that some feeling, which he had not striven to impart, but of which he was the cause, had assisted in developing her. He had no desire to encourage the feeling; he did not reciprocate it. But he was only a man, and he could but look with extra kindness on the one who was expressing it for him. "She is unconscious that her face is betraying her, poor Dolly," he thought, with chivalrous tenderness, and at the same moment Dolly was thinking,—

"*That* fetched him! Lady Roydmore may abuse me to him as much as she likes to-day; he won't

think bad things of me when he remembers that I looked like *that* at him."

"Good-bye, Dolly!" he said, lifting his deer-stalker. "I must give you a ride one day."

"You will have to be my master, then. I should so love to learn riding of, *you*."

"All right! so I will," he cried, as he rode after Lady Roydmore, who had given her mare an extremely uncalled-for and sharp cut with a stinging little whip. "What in the world's the matter, Helen? That mare won't stand any humbugging."

"Neither will I, Harry. What bad taste—to say nothing else—it is of you to let that girl play off her flirting tricks on you. You'll be having the doctor's assistant regarding you and speaking of you as a rival presently! Miss Dolly never wastes time. She improves the shining hours with him every evening when the poor wretch is not in the surgery or on his rounds. She has been practising that look on him with good effect lately."

"What look?"

"The loving yet leaving look; in other words, the one she favoured you with as we were starting."

"Poor little girl! she's only down on her luck. You can't expect a young girl like her to look hilarious when she sees her friends going off to enjoy themselves, and knows that she has to stay at home and be dull."

"Don't class me among her friends, please, Harry. I make no pretence of being one. Let me advise you never to be lured into a correspondence with her. If you are you will have to repent it. Leave her to the doctor's assistant. She may turn out well enough in her own sphere, unless she comes to grief in her efforts to get into a higher one."

He felt that he was being scolded for a fault he had not committed, and treated as one who was unable to take care of himself. If Helen had been a less perfect picture at the moment, or a less clever horse-

woman, he would have resented these things. As it was, he only said,—

“You’re rather intolerant, but I suppose the nicest women are that sometimes. Do you know, I’ve heard a rumour to-day that everything has gone to the dogs at The Court, and that poor Geoffrey Graves is off his head.”

“Oh, no, no, it can’t be so bad as that,” Helen protested. “I have had a letter from Jane—a letter which has pained and puzzled me. I wanted to tell you all about it; but she says nothing about the Graveses. She only says that she wants me to help her to find a situation where she can keep herself for a time, while her money is wanted for something else.”

“That girl work for her living, while that rascally sister of hers spends her money! You won’t allow it, Helen? You must forbid it.”

“I have no authority over her.”

“Her brother has. Roydmore will never permit it.”

“Roydmore is not only amiably selfish enough to permit anything that does not interfere with his own comfort, but he is going to be married to a girl whose father will control the purse. Jane has a will of her own when she thinks she is right, and I know her well enough to know that she will always think it right to sacrifice everything but her honour for her sister. If this that you have heard is true about poor Geoffrey Graves, Florence will want and will take all Jane can give her, and Jane will give it, and woe to the one who interferes between them. But I have something stranger still to tell you. Jane may come here to Plym Tor as governess to Mrs. Abbot’s children; at any rate, Mrs. Abbot has made me write to Jane to-day offering her the situation.”

His face grew cloudy and dark red under the influence of a variety of emotions.

“I thought Dolly Abbot taught her aunt’s children?”

"She sits in the room with them for an hour or two of a morning, and reads novels, while the poor little wretches flounder through columns of spelling, and stumble up and down rows of figures ; and when they don't know these 'lessons,' as she calls them, she boxes their ears. It's not an improving education this they are pursuing under Miss Dolly. Jane, at least, will never impart any knowledge to them that they would be better without."

"It will drive me mad to see Miss Herries in such a position," he growled, ignoring the last side cut at Dolly.

"Perhaps under all the circumstances, it will be just as well you should not see her at all."

"But I shall know she's there. That woman, her sister, ought to be shot."

"I grant you Florence is detestable and unworthy to the last degree, but Jane is neither a child nor a fool. As she has chosen to do this, neither you nor I have any right to bemoan ourselves about it. I can't look upon her as belonging to me, consequently I feel it would be impertinent on my part, as well as futile, were I to interfere with her."

"You mean that it's more impertinent and equally futile of me to express an opinion about her ?"

"I don't think she has offered you much encouragement to do so. From the night of that ball, when my husband was seized with his dying illness, Jane never mentioned you, nor seemed to think of you."

"Why should she have done either?" he asked quickly, feeling the implied rebuke to either his vanity or presumption.

"Oh ! I don't know ; some girls would have allowed themselves to betray a little interest in a man who had shown his in them. But Jane has that enviable, pliant kind of nature that enables her to concentrate all her interest on the present."

"She's right ! Let the past and the future go hang ! The present is what wise men and women do well

to make the most of—when it's pleasant as ours is, to-day, Helen."

"As ours is to-day ; as all the past I have spent with you has been," she said very softly.

CHAPTER XIX. VII.

NEW EXPERIENCE.

MISS HERRIES had not anticipated meeting with any very violent opposition from her responsible friends and relatives when she prepared to carry her resolution of going out uncomfortably into the world, and fighting the battle of life on an uninteresting field with inefficient weapons. Nor was she agreeably disappointed. They suffered her to gang her ain gait with very faint remonstrance, and no opposition whatever. Her brother told her "she was an idiot, and Florence was a rogue," but he added that "unless she liked to try and hit it off with Miss Levison when the latter should become his wife, and live with them, he had no other plan to propose for her."

"You're very kind," she had told Lord Roydmore, "but I should get so tired of trying to hit it off with any one all day and every day. It would be much harder work than teaching children, or reading aloud, or doing any of the things that governesses and companions have to do."

"It's a beastly shame of Florence to swindle you out of your money and leave you in such a hole," Roydmore said warmly ; but he did not further press the point of her living with himself and his future wife.

The rich old aunt from whom Jane had been taught to have "expectations" from her infancy destroyed these at one blow by writing the most lucid letter she had written for years, announcing that unless Jane retracted her sinful offer to Florence, and

forswore all communication with that offender for ever, she (the aunt) would find it necessary to alter her will and exclude Jane's name from it. There being no good result to be attained by answering such a letter as this Jane put it in the fire unanswered. Whereupon the old lady, who would have relented if Jane had gone humbly and pleaded for help and mercy, literally did as she had threatened, and cast about for a deserving successor to her contumacious niece, in the ranks of the cringing among her acquaintances.

Irresponsible people, who felt that whatever might betide her she could never devolve upon them in any way, gave her grave and earnest advice of all kinds by the ream and bushel. Some few, who were curious to see how she would stand the tug of war between herself and lowered fortunes, urged her to stand firm to her generous intention, and carry out her act of self-abnegation to the bitter end. But the majority were vehement and eloquent in their denunciations of the sister who could so quietly allow the sacrifice to be made for her. Jane listened to those who spoke, and read the letters (or at least portions of them) of those who wrote, and was so little influenced by their outpourings that she scarcely took the trouble to tell herself that they knew nothing at all about it, and that she was the best law to herself, and would be her own and only final court of appeal.

There was nothing sentimental or romantic in her decision or in the motives which had made her arrive at it. There was a ghastly necessity for the man who was her sister's husband to be kept in close confinement, watched, guarded and ministered to ; and in order that his wretched existence under these circumstances should be made as endurable as possible, it was a first condition that liberal terms should be paid for him. There was no one else in either family ready or willing or able to assure these liberal terms. Therefore, naturally, Jane offered and gave them with all her heart and will.

The last evening that the sisters spent together at The Court was not at all sad for either of them. Indeed, they made rather merry over the possibilities that were before Jane when she became a member of the country doctor's household.

"If you were in a book instead of real life," Florence said, "the wife, who is probably blowsy, dowdy, dull and unclothed as far as regards anything like decent dressing goes, would die, and you in due time would marry the doctor—a handsome, barbaric Englishman, on whose 'bold visage middle age has slightly set its signet sage.' Really, Jane, you might do worse. And then you could take poor Geoffrey in, and make your 'medicine-man' attend to him for nothing, and so save your three hundred a year."

"I'll think about it, and let you know when the wife dies and the 'medicine-man' prostrates himself at my feet. You're not very ambitious for me, I observe."

"My dear Jane, your romantic scheme has put it out of any one's power to be ambitious for you. I tell you candidly, though I—or rather poor Geoffrey—benefit by your act, *I* consider it the act of a lunatic. I can't think *why* you did it. *I* should never have blamed you if you hadn't come to my rescue; but now, as you have done it, it would be treacherous of you to hang back. You have forced me to rely upon you, and if you don't justify that reliance, it will be treating me as a cat does a mouse."

"I won't fail in the fulfilment of my part of the bargain, Flo," the younger sister replied. Then they kissed each other, and went on their respective ways to bed. Jane with a slight feeling of chagrin at the cool way in which Florence was ready to relegate her (Jane) to the limbo of a lower social level, and a monotonously eventless future. Florence, with the exultant conviction that on the morrow she would be freed from even the slight restraint which Jane's presence imposed upon her.

Lady Roydmore had brought her visit to the Abbots

to a close, and had established herself for a short time at a Plymouth hotel. She had two reasons for doing this. The one was, that the sight of Dolly Abbot had become intolerable to her. The other was that she honestly felt that Jane would find less difficulty in adapting herself to her new niche if she were unfettered by her (Helen's) presence, and unbiassed by her opinions, than she would if the reverse were the case. Accordingly, Miss Herries found herself a stranger among strangers, and rather liked the situation. The girl had a wholesome love of change and novelty, a natural craving for fresh experiences, and a good deal of curiosity as to the reason why Helen had buried herself alive in a country place, far from her favourite haunts, and quite out of the route (Jane believed) of any of her favourite haunts. This latter little mystery would be more satisfactorily cleared up in Lady Roydmore's absence than in her presence, therefore Miss Herries neither felt nor feigned disappointment when she learnt that her stepmother was gone.

It was not a brilliant family circle, that in which Miss Herries found herself so strangely settled. Neither was it an exceptionally dull one, as country middle-class family circles go. The doctor himself was a liberal reader of journals, daily and weekly, of every shade of opinion on other besides medical and scientific subjects. Additionally he was unselfishly desirous of giving those around him the benefit of the results of his dips into truth, fiction, fact, fancy, startling medical discoveries, and critiques or novelties in Art, Literature and the Drama, in which latter, by the way, there was frequently a lack of truth, fact or fancy. In short he was well up in current history, was a loud, lively talker, and was further blessed with the bold, breezy manner which often accompanies a magnificently healthy physique. He led such an open-air existence, that when he did come into the house he seemed to bring in some of the atmosphere of the moors with him. Altogether he looked—Miss Herries

thought—far more like a hearty, sporting country squire than like the village doctor he was. Jane liked him at once. Liked him for his vigorous personality and indomitable, bright-hearted good humour, which had the rare quality of being weather-proof. If the sun shone, Doctor Abbot smiled and beamed under it. If the clouds opened their sluice-gates, and poured out their torrents in the way that is peculiar to the beautiful west, he smiled and beamed in precisely the same way. Nothing ruffled, nothing depressed, nothing made him irritable. Not even when he came back hungry, wet and tired from a round which had lasted several hours, to find Dolly in one of her most perplexingly and insolently disagreeable moods towards her aunt, not even then would the light-hearted husband and uncle permit himself to see any but the sunny side of either woman, a course of procedure which made his equally easy-going wife bless the day she had married him, and caused his niece, who had something of the fretful porcupine in her, to despise him for the lack of that chivalrous discernment which should have made him *her* advocate, and his wife's accuser and judge.

As for Mrs. Abbot, she was, as has been said, easy-going, warm-hearted, and only too happy to give and take every bit of pleasure that could be given to those with whom she came in contact, or taken from her surroundings. There were no hidden depths in her kindly nature, no angles to be approached carefully by those over whom she had dominion. Jane's sacrifice ceased to appear to herself in the light of one, as she assimilated herself with these people rapidly, with the unerring conviction that, whatever their manner might be, it was "real mahogany, not veneer."

The assistant, Mr. Barker, about whom Lady Roydmore had spoken so contemptuously with regard to Dolly, was a pleasant element in the household, for he was young and good-looking, and could sing many of Moore's Irish melodies with much taste and

cultivation, and quite as if he meant them. Like a true son of Erin, whenever his eyes loved to look upon any one, his heart quickly followed, and it so happened that his eyes loved to look upon Miss Herries as soon as he saw her. Hitherto he had found Miss Dolly Abbot a very pleasant relaxation after a hard day's work ; but Dolly's little silent ways and wordless lures, and jerky little semi-petulant, semi-playful, flirting speeches, seemed ungraceful and rather odd than enjoyable when contrasted with Jane's fearless, frank, high-bred, unsuspecting, undesigning manner of treating him in common with the others. He had no private property, and no particular professional prospects, but there seemed to him to be nothing either rash or presumptuous in determining to lay siege to the heart of the pretty governess without delay. Under the intoxicating influence of her eyes, he saw his chances of eventually getting into partnership with Dr. Abbot double themselves and come nearer ; and Dolly noticed the signs of this intoxication, and saw at once the source from which he drew the draught that caused it.

Dolly had no desire to capture and permanently cage this Irish bird who flew so gaily from tree to tree. She had much bigger game in view, but until the big game came within range of her gun, it was fine sport and good practice to try and wing Mr. Barker. Until Miss Herries came, there had been no difficulty in the way of her going after her bird whenever it pleased her. He was always ready to sit still and be fired at, always willing to take his wounds to her to have them dressed. He found Dolly quite as good a pastime as she found him, but she was mistaken in supposing that she could hold him in reserve, and pick him up for better for worse permanently by-and-by if she so pleased.

Dolly began to feel that her judgment in this matter was in error when Miss Herries arrived. The newcomer had the overwhelming charm of novelty in addition to those of generous youth, unusual beauty

and those touches of breeding which only those who are to the manner born are blessed with. No wonder that the inflammable nature and easily ignited heart of the young Irish doctor succumbed to a personality that was a revelation to him. There was on the face of it nothing either presumptuous or foolish in this abrupt surrender to a girl who was apparently on precisely the same social platform as himself. The sight of her the first night, the thought of her and the sense of her during the week that followed, stirred his heart to hidden and hitherto unsuspected depths of feeling, and his mind to the formation of a good resolve.

This latter was that he would work, read, study, practise, experimentalise without ceasing for the next six months. By the end of that time, if "will" was the potent factor in a man's life, which he had been taught to consider it, he would have become invaluable professionally to Dr. Abbot, and also dangerous as a possible rival. Further, he would also have become essential to the happiness of Miss Herries.

Both the resolve and the promise of joy which he made to himself should he fulfil the resolve became the brightest lights that had ever illuminated his pathway, and in their radiance he felt himself to be a man who need not shrink from putting any fate to the touch and facing any rival.

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Miss Herries got through her duties in a way that her employers were good enough to say were very satisfactory. But this kindly verdict did not deceive the girl herself. She knew quite well that her pretty presence and graceful ways did not compensate the children whom she was professing to teach for her lack of method and inability to impart even such knowledge as she had. A thousand things distracted her attention when it ought to have been concentrated on her pupils and their work. The sound of the rippling river, or of a gun going off in the adjoining woods and covers, would send her thoughts flying

off to shooting-luncheons and water-picnics, and to those who had shared these delights with her during those few brief months when, as the Honourable Jane Herries, she had been asked to countless entertainments of the sort in town and country. The morning papers, too, distracted her a good deal, especially that column in the *Daily Telegraph* in which she read of what is doing in London day by day. Altogether, it must be admitted that there was so little of the heroic martyr about Jane that her self-imposed work palled upon her painfully, and she was longing to escape from it before she had been in Dr. Abbot's family a week.

CHAPTER XX. VIII.

“GOOD-NIGHT, AND—GO!”

HELEN had declared to herself, and had tried hard to believe her own declaration, that in going into Plymouth and taking up her abode at an hotel which faced the Hoe, she had been actuated solely and wholly by a desire to give herself the benefit of sea breezes, and to make herself acquainted with a part of the country of whose beauties she had heard much. That Captain Stafford should be quartered there was “a coincidence unquestionably, but one which had not influenced her in the least,” she told herself, and she implied the same thing to him the first time he came to call upon her.

“I used to hear my mother, who was a Plymouth woman, talk so much about Mount Edgecombe, and the Devil's Point, and the Tamar and St. Germain's rivers, that I have always been longing to see them. I may never have such an opportunity again, for when once I get back to London, Devonshire will seem such a very long way off,” she said to him; and he replied,—

“ You’re right ; the Holy Land seems nearer than Devonshire when one’s in town. It’s odd, though, that London doesn’t seem far off when one’s in Devonshire. I am constantly running up. I thought of going up to-morrow or the next day, in fact.”

She felt disappointed, but would not betray herself.

“ If he wants me to ask him not to go while I am here, he will find himself mistaken,” she thought, as she said quietly,—

“ Do go ! I want you to do a little commission for me. Choose a wedding present for Jack. You have such exquisite taste, and you are sure to select something a man would like.”

He had not the most remote intention of running up to town either to-morrow or at all just then, but he wanted her to understand that he was not going to let her appropriate him.

“ When is Roydmore to be married ? ”

“ I don’t know the day, but very soon now. Jane will be able to tell me when I see her. I am keeping away from her just at first, in order to let her get accustomed to her new sphere. I should be a disturbing influence to the poor dear child.”

“ I think it’s an iniquitous thing that the ‘ poor dear child ’ has been allowed by her family to make such a little goose of herself.”

“ She has a very strong will, as I have told you before.”

“ Roydmore ought to be ashamed of himself to permit one of his sisters to quixotically cut her throat in order to smooth the path of one of the most worthlessly selfish women that ever stepped.”

“ You may abuse Florence as much as you like—I don’t care for her a bit more than you do—but you shall not blame Roydmore. I believe Jane told him that she wouldn’t let him do anything for her. The fact is, Jane would have felt she was doing a mean thing if she had allowed herself to be recompensed for her goodness to her sister.”

“ I hear she is finding the bed she has made any-

thing but one of roses. Governessing isn't such fun as she fancied it would be, poor girl."

"Ah, how have you heard that, Harry?" she asked quickly.

"How? Oh, I have heard it. A fellow forgets where he picked up a bit of gossip. Don't you think, as the day is so fine, we had better go for a stroll and have a look at the old place?"

"He has either seen that little cat Dolly, or she has written to him," Lady Roydmore thought; but she would not give Dolly fictitious importance in his estimation by wording her suspicion.

"It's strange that you should have met any one who takes interest enough in her already to have detected that she is disillusioned. Certainly I will go for a stroll. Can't we go to Mount Edgecombe and stroll there?"

"The Park is not open to-day; but if you like I'll take you to one of the rummest little fishing villages you ever dreamt of. Are you good for a four mile walk? If you are, we will go to Cawsand."

Helen hated the prospect of walking four miles, but she loved the idea of having him all to herself for that distance of lovely, lonely country road. Love conquered hate, as it always should do, and tinged her tone with something like enthusiasm as she said,—

"Delighted! Cawsand is another place that has been described to me so graphically and vividly by my mother that it is as clear cut as a cameo in my mind. Isn't it united to a Kingsand, and doesn't it revolt at its union, and give itself airs of superiority; and doesn't Kingsand do precisely the same?"

"I am not up to its traditions, but I'll tell you anything you like about it," he answered laughingly. "My dear woman, you don't propose walking four miles in those boots, do you?"

She bent her head and surveyed her beautifully slender ankles and exquisitely shod feet.

“ My boots are perfection in shape and fit. What fault have you to find with them, Sir Critic? ”

“ Only that the heels are so high that your insteps will be dislocated when you get to the bottom of the first hill ; then I shall have to carry you. The office will be a proud and happy one, of course, but I think we should enjoy each other's company more if we bore our respective burdens ourselves.”

“ I haven't anything lower heeled, and I am not going to make my feet look hideous in flat-soled boots to please any man,” she laughed out, and the slim, graceful feet looked so pretty as they bore her from the room, that he felt as if he would very much like to have to carry their owner in his arms over—say, a few yards of lovely, lonely country road.

They found themselves by-and-by in a waggonette which was engaged in the service of the transmission of the public from Cremyl, when they landed on the Cornish coast, down—or rather up and down—to Cawsand. Their charioteer was reckless and skilful.

He knew his horses, and they knew their road and their own ability to keep their knees from coming in contact with it. There was something delicious to both Helen and Harry Stafford in this rushing progress that they made. It checked all attempts at consequent conversation. It gave them the pleasurable sensation of being together without thought for the future. At times, indeed, when their breath was not taken away by an unorganised rush down a precipice, or a spasmodic scramble up one, it gave them time to—think.

At length they reached the picturesque little fishing village which was their bourne, and as soon as they reached it, before they gave themselves time to explore its quaint and devious ways, they made arrangements for defeating their own objects in coming here to explore it by taking a boat and going over to the breakwater. There, with wide-winged seagulls swooping around them, and innumerable little black

“divers” standing about in the water on their heads at brief intervals for the amusement of the strange human beings, Helen declared her desire of staying for a few hours. This desire necessitated sending back the boat to Cawsand for luncheon. As soon as the boat was out of reach of their hailing her, the irony of fate decreed that the wind should begin to blow vigorously, the rain to descend in torrents, the sky to darken, the waves to begin to lash themselves into a preliminary rage, and the seagulls to make for the headland with all speed, as they filled the air with those mournfully ominous cries which are the sure precursors of a storm.

The lighthouse afforded them shelter from the pitiless downpour and the raging blasts. “But how would it be when night fell?” each asked silently of him and herself. Unless the storm ceased, no open boat could possibly come to their rescue, and even should one do so, Lady Roydmore had far too great a horror of the mighty ocean in a state of turmoil to trust herself upon its treacherous waves.

With all her heart she disliked the position, and regretted having helped to place herself in it. She saw that her companion, though he was keenly alive to the discomforts she might be called upon to endure during their detention in the lighthouse, and sincerely sorry for her, was at the same time consumedly annoyed on his own account. The tale of their involuntary isolation from their kind for perhaps a night only, perhaps (odious thought) for a longer period, was one that would surely leak out, especially as he ought to be on duty at six o’clock the next morning. The story would leak out, and he would be chaffed about a woman he still liked too well to relish the idea of being compelled to listen to any light innuendoes about her; while she—and this possibility stung him more—would inevitably be whispered and gossipped about as incautious, indiscreet and fast for having permitted herself to be placed in such a predicament with a man who was not her acknowledged lover,

and yet with whom her name had been coupled for many years.

As the hours went by, and they saw no chance of release, hunger and thirst began to assert themselves. The lighthouse keeper, on whose hospitality they had so involuntarily thrust themselves, made them heartily welcome to such provisions as he had, and lamented that the fresh stores which he had expected this day would now not be forthcoming. Hunger and the fear of hurting her host's feelings made Helen swallow bread that was slightly off colour, pork that was so fat it made her sick to look at it, and water that had become brackish. They made as comfortable a couch as they could for her on a locker up against the side of the fireplace, piling up every kind of rug, pilot-coat and blanket that could be found in the place. And here Helen sat through the waning hours of the day, leaning her head against the unresponsive side of the chimney-piece, listening to the rush and roar of wind and wave, and wishing, oh ! so heartily, that she could lay it instead against Harry Stafford's shoulder, with the knowledge that he liked having it there, and sleep out this "great gap of time" till the storm abated.

"The worst of it will be over at sundown," the lighthouse keeper told her reassuringly. "Some steamer might come in then, and they would signal to her to send a boat to take the lady off," a prospect at which Helen had to feign to be pleased, but from which she shrank in terror, as she pictured herself in an open boat, being tossed across the waves in the darkness, which would be their portion after sundown.

Captain Stafford had been wandering about the lighthouse restlessly for an hour when the darkness fell suddenly, as it does on a stormy night in late autumn, and he knew that he must go to her and make her comprehend that where they were they must remain till the morning. He had not the slightest inclination to flirt or sentimentalise with her this day. He was too sincerely sorry for the awkwardness

of this act, in which they were both forced to take a part, to have any hankering after a resuscitation of the love-making of the past ; and she, in spite of the longing she felt to be sympathised with and soothed by him, did not, to do her justice, make the faintest effort to tempt him.

“We must make up our minds to be shut up here till to-morrow now ; it’s so dark that I can’t see my hand when I hold it out at arm’s length. I wouldn’t have had this happen for the world. Poor Helen !”

He spoke so kindly, and his eyes, as he bent down to rearrange a rug round her shoulders, had such a warm, tender light in them that she might have been forgiven if she had mistaken these things for signs of a rekindled fire of passion in his heart ; but she knew that the fire was burnt out, and she would not deceive herself.

“I am fortunate in one thing at least,” she said. “There is no one to scold me for my escapade. People, if they hear of it, may sit in the seat of the scornful over me, or may laugh at me, but there is no one to scold me.”

“I should be awfully savage if people did either one or the other,” he said hotly. “After all, we are not omnipotent ; none but a fool could suppose for an instant that we either of us ordered the winds and waves to arise.”

“Perhaps no one will ever hear of it,” she said soothingly. It gratified her to see that he thought more of her, and feared more for her, than he did of and for himself, and with a throb of pleasure she felt that he respected her. She was conscious of having done many things with regard to her treatment of both Lord Roydmore and Mr. Wyndham of which he disapproved, and which had made him angry and bitter with her at one time. She was conscious, too, that she had shown her love for him with desperate indiscretion many a time and oft. But he held her guiltless of having been similarly indiscreet with regard to any other man ! So at least there was this

balm in Gilead for her ; if he loved her no longer with the hot, exhausting passion of old days, when the sight and the sound and the sense of her made his earthly paradise, at least he liked and respected her sufficiently to be intensely sensitive where her reputation was concerned.

“Perhaps no one will ever hear of it,” she repeated ; “and even if the most is made of it, it amounts to nothing very terrible after all. No one who knows either of us would believe for a moment that we were in collusion with the elements to condemn ourselves to such hours of discomfort as we are enduring. Don’t let what may be said distress you, Harry ; it can’t hurt *me*, and I know it’s only of me that you are thinking.”

Her trust in his generosity and chivalry touched him. Whatever there might be of diplomacy—or, as he termed it, “humbug”—about her, he knew that she meant what she said, when she declared her belief that it was of her fair name only he was thinking in this dilemma.

“I wish my sister-in-law Lily had not gone. She would have helped you to pull this business through if any confounded talk is raised about it.”

“My dear Harry !” she raised herself up, and was rejuvenated wonderfully by the sudden wave of angry pride which swept over her, “please don’t imagine that I am on such insecure ground that my footsteps may falter, and I may tumble unless I am held up by your sister-in-law. You are bowing the knee a little too lowly in your desire to appease or square Mrs. Grundy, when you suggest that your sister-in-law might have been my social shield and buckler had she been still in Plymouth. Moreover, she was a stranger here. Whose opinion would she have influenced ? No one’s, as far as I can see, but Miss Abbot’s—the girl you call ‘Dolly.’”

He sat thoughtfully twisting one end of his well-waxed moustache for a few moments, then he said,—

“That girl does contrive to find out things about

most people in the neighbourhood, whether she knows them or not. Yet she's not in the swim ; poor little girl, she doesn't get much fun out of society here."

Helen's eyes put on their haughtiest expression for an instant, before she veiled them with her lashes.

" Her sources of information are not interesting to me, and are probably not such as *we* could discuss," she said coldly. " I can believe that she holds a subtle spell for the amorous youth of the neighbourhood ; the youth that sees a Duchess in every Dulcinea, and is ready to fight windmills for a Blow-salind. Why wonder that she is well posted up in the scandals of the social set in which she has no place ? *I* can guess how and from whom she gets her information."

" Give me your guess, and I'll tell you if you are near the truth," he laughed carelessly. It rather amused him to see that Helen, who could command him about matters in regard to which Dolly Abbot would have to wheedle or supplicate him, was permitting herself to feel and evince jealousy of the latter young lady. More for the sake of continuing to distract Helen's attention from the discomforts of her present situation than with any idea of championing Dolly, he said,—

" I wish you would give the reins to your real good-nature, and give that little girl a good time while you're in Plymouth instead of regarding her as an accomplished, hardened and unscrupulous girl. It's breaking a butterfly on the wheel to cut at her with your practised sword."

" She is a hybrid, half-butterfly and half-wasp, and she has taught you how to sting ; that, if you want to know the truth, is the reason why I turn what you are pleased to call my practised sword against her. Don't speak of her any more, please, Harry, it's a despicable thing that a thought of Miss Dolly Abbot should get mingled up with the thoughts that the winds and waves are giving me for my disturbance to-night."

She put out both her hands to him as she spoke, with a pathetic air of pleading weariness. He bent his head down and touched them with his lips for a moment, then looked up suddenly with a deep flush on his face, and said,—

“I wish to Heaven I could be sure of always feeling like this——”

“But you can’t feel sure, or rather, you do feel sure that it won’t last beyond the hour,” she interrupted hastily. “Go now, Harry, before we have either of us time to say anything more silly. And *do* let me hear, as soon as it’s daylight, if we have any chance of getting off this dreadful place.”

“You look so awfully uncomfortable and desolate that I feel like a brute for leaving you. Waking or sleeping, I shall be thinking of you the whole night, Helen.”

“I am a terrible incubus to you, I know that.”

“You are determined to misunderstand me to-night.”

“Ah, no! I understand both you and myself so well, that I say again good-night and—*go*, Harry.”

CHAPTER IX.

BITTER RECOLLECTIONS.

THE morning after the storm broke with what those who had suffered from the latter felt to be irritating balminess and splendour. The winds were no longer out with the waves at play. The sun shone out from a cloudless sky of blue. The climatic influences entered into and stirred all the holiday blood in the inhabitants of Plymouth and the region round. The town-bound people chartered drags, waggonettes, *char-a-bancs*, and every other kind of wheeled locomotive agent they could get hold of, and made excursions into the country; the country-chained ones

visited the town. Lady Roydmore and Captain Stafford being picked up gaily by the boat which they had chartered on the previous day, and sent for their luncheon, with which it never returned, were rowed over to Cawsand about midday, chastened and subdued in spirit, and considerably dilapidated as to their appearance from their sojourn on the breakwater. The donkey's ears of velvet in Helen's hat were so sodden with spray, that they fell forward limply, giving a grotesque, not to say an intoxicated, effect to the hat they were intended to adorn. Her collar and cuffs had been saturated with spray, and were consequently crumpled as to form, and dingy as to colour. The same remark applied to Captain Stafford's throat and wrist bands of fine linen, which resembled damp rags. His moustache, out of which all the *Pomade Hongroise* had been soaked, fell about his upper lip untidily, much as a Skye terrier's fringe does when its owner is wet. All the polish had been taken off their smart boots. Marks of weariness and vexation of spirit were stamped in unmistakable characters all over their forms and faces, in fact, and the wisest course they could have pursued would have been to have got into an excursion steamer, hidden themselves in a cabin, and gone straight back to Plymouth with as little delay.

But instead of doing this, some perverse spirit seized upon Captain Stafford, and made him say,—

“It's the open day at Mount Edgecombe. We may never have a chance of seeing the place together again ; what do you say to walking through the park by the coast to Cremyl? It's too early for many people to be about, so we needn't mind looking rather shady as to our clothes, and the walk will freshen you up.”

“Isn't my hat a little too awful? and my gloves are full of sand and salt water ; see ! I can't get them on,” she answered, holding up bits of torn, damp and wrinkled kid for his inspection.

“Never mind the gloves ; your hands are pretty

enough to do without any other covering than your rings. We shall get down to Cremyl about two o'clock, and then we will have some luncheon at the little inn there, and cross in the steamer to the Admiral's Hard afterwards. Then I will put you into a four-wheeler, which will conceal you from the eye of man until you reach the sanctuary of your hotel. It would be a thousand pities to miss seeing the place, as it is open to-day."

"Do you really wish me to come? I am so appallingly untidy!"

"What does that matter? I've already seen you at your worst, you know, and we are not likely to meet any one we know."

"Then I will come, and enjoy it without thinking of the hopeless figure I cut," she said, surrendering even her vanity to his wishes.

They loitered about on the sands, amongst the rocks and pools of water, for an hour, and then, having rendered themselves still more untidy by reason of having inadvertently slipped up to their knees in salt water, they started under a brilliant sun, that illuminated every defect in their toilets, for the walk round the coast road to Cremyl.

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The day had dawned with equal warmth and brightness at Plym Tor. The windows were thrown wide open as Dr. Abbot's family sat at breakfast. The song of birds, the hum of insects, the rain-refreshed sweet scents of late roses, mignonette and jasmine came pouring into the room, calling them out into the open air with a subtlety of entreaty that appealed to each one of them. The children spoke sorrowfully of the hardness of their fate in having to waste such a morning over lessons. Doctor Abbot declared that it would be an offence against nature not to go out and enjoy it to the full on such a day. Mrs. Abbot echoed his sentiments as usual. Dolly grumbled that it "was as well to sit in the house and

darn stockings and read as it was to do these things in the garden alone." And Mr. Barker reminded his senior that there were no special cases which required his (Barker's) attention this day. Jane was the only one of the party who refrained from throwing out hints of a desire for a change from the daily routine. But perhaps not one of them yearned more desperately than she did for such a change ; for a lapse, however brief, into the old *dolce far niente* existence under a cloudless sky.

"Why shouldn't *all* the young people make a day of it in the open?" Dr. Abbot suggested. "They can take the waggonette and take a hamper, and make a picnic of it. Barker can drive them; I don't want him."

The proposition was hailed with enthusiasm by every one but Dolly. She felt that a picnic consisting of three children, two girls and only one young man would be a weary thing in the heart of the country, more especially as she was not the girl whom the young man was most disposed to affect.

"How tired we shall be of each other before the day is over," she said; "we shall only have the same things to say to one another out on the moor by a river as we have been saying to each other in the house for the last fortnight."

"Why go to Dartmoor? Why not let us go to Mount Edgecombe? You are sure to meet some of your Plymouth friends there, Miss Abbot."

A delicate pink spot rose to Dolly's cheeks, and she rewarded Mr. Barker for his suggestion with a smile that had the attraction of being directed to him in a secretive sort of way, as if she were anxious that no one else should see it and its meaning.

"A capital idea! Does it please you, Miss Herries?"

"It pleases me more than I can say," Jane said heartily.

"You won't make us pick ferns and wild flowers as we go through the park, will you, Miss Herries?"

one of her pupils asked ; “ one lady who taught us did, and made us tell her their names, and would teach us all about their petals and stamens and families ! We didn’t like it ; we wanted a holiday.”

“ I’ll promise not to instruct you one bit,” Jane laughed. “ I want a holiday too, and I know nothing about flowers and ferns, beyond that they are lovely and sweet.” Then she thought of the flower lesson Captain Stafford had given her on the occasion of their first meeting—of the myrtle and jasmine she had plucked from her own bouquet to make a button-hole for him on the night of the memorable ball—of the few beautiful minutes she had spent with him behind the palms in the conservatory—of the words he had said then, and of that one-kiss !

As the remembrance of this last rushed into her mind, the happy smile of present contentment faded from her lips and eyes, the blood rushed up in a rich wave of colour over her face and throat, till she looked “ like a queen of roses,” Barker thought ; “ like a big peony,” Dolly said to herself contemptuously. A deep, angry feeling of having been trifled with and thrown aside by the man who had won her so easily and lightly, possessed her. She could almost have struck the lips which he had pressed for nothing more than the gratification of an idle passing fancy. For one moment she prayed that she might never see him again. The next she longed to do so, in order that she might show him that she too could be careless, callous, forgetful and contemptuous of him, as he had been of her. And some at least of these thoughts were patent to one of the group round the breakfast-table.

“ She’s thinking of some one she is fond of, and who has treated her badly,” the astute Dolly thought. “ I wonder if it’s Captain Stafford ? He knows Lady Roydmore so well, that of course he must know her step-daughter.”

Her reflections were interrupted at this juncture by her aunt saying,—

"Come and help me to pack the hamper, Dolly ; you ought to start soon and have a long day there."

"I have to do something to my hat ; if I stay to pack the hamper I shall not be ready."

"Shall I trim your hat ?" Jane asked, and Dolly surveyed her coolly for a moment or two before she answered,—

"No, thanks, I like my own taste best. Captain Stafford says I should make my fortune as a lady-milliner if I only had free scope."

As a matter of fact, Captain Stafford had never said this or anything equivalent to it, but by her little flight of imagination Dolly made the discovery she wanted to make. At this casual, easy, taking-him-for-granted mention of her hero, all the colour ebbed from Miss Herries' face as quickly as it had risen ; even her lips grew pale and quivered ominously, while the curious flickering light of mingled anger and jealousy came into her eyes. Her hand, too, as it rested on the table, playing with a bunch of mignonette which one of the children had given to her, shook for an instant. The next she had risen, and was following Mrs. Abbot out of the room with the words,—

"Let me help you with the hamper."

"And let me help too ; then I shall be able to save you the trouble of unpacking it, for I shall know where to find everything," Mr. Barker pleaded eagerly ; and Jane, who was feeling sore and sorry for herself, granted the plea, and suffered herself to be soothed for the time by the attentions of a man for whom she had not a particle of feeling beyond this, that he was better than nothing for the hour.

The re-arrangement of Dolly's hat did not absorb her long. When it was bent into a more becoming shape, and re-decorated to her satisfaction, she still had time to write a note which contained the following sentence among many others:—

"I told you a little about our new governess the other day. She begins to find it much pleasanter

here than she did at first. Uncle's assistant is a very good-looking young man, and she is very proud of his attentions. I suppose she hasn't been used to many from men, or her head would not be so completely turned by his."

This note, when she had written and sealed it, she addressed to,—

"Captain H. Stafford, V.C. the ——th," and she took care to post it herself presently when they were passing through the village.

The waggonette held them all comfortably. Mr. Barker was the driver, and his obvious anxiety that Miss Herries should occupy the seat by his side might have been embarrassing to the girl if her head and heart had not both been full to the brim of thoughts of that other man who had stamped his image on her soul as her hero for life. She felt ashamed of herself for being so weak as to permit herself to feel shattered because a girl whom she had instinctively from the first felt to be vain, shallow and false (if nothing worse), had spoken of him in tones of assured familiarity. It hurt her pride and delicacy; it mortified her till she felt as if crushed to the earth; it angered her till she lost all power of concentrating herself on the objects of the hour, that she should be jealous of Dolly. Jealous! of a girl for whom she had one of those intuitive aversions which sensitive and warm-natured people are apt to conceive, and which are almost invariably correct and justified by after events. Jealous on her own account, and jealous for him. It galled her to the quick to think that he had in any way, however slight, given this girl the right or the power to speak of him in her simpering, boastful way, as though he and she were on a footing that was not comprehended of the others. These feelings intensified themselves, and made the earlier portion of this happy holiday a grim thing indeed to Jane, when they reached the post-office. For there Miss Dolly commanded that a halt should be made, and when she had leisurely descended she came round to the front

of the waggonette, with the letter held in such a way that Jane could not help seeing to whom it was addressed.

"You don't happen to have a postage stamp in your pocket, do you?" Dolly asked artlessly, screening the letter from the observation of the lynx-eyed children; "it would save me the trouble of going in if you had one."

Miss Herries took out her purse and extracted a stamp from it, which Dolly carefully affixed to the letter. Then she got into the waggonette again, with the pleased conviction that she had sent her arrow very close to the bull's-eye this time.

For a time after this incident, Jane was tongue-tied. Her mind was so full of one subject that she dared not speak for fear of the words that might force themselves unintentionally from her lips. He came between her and all possibility of enjoying the beauty of the weather and scenery. He came for this brief period of time between herself and common consideration for others. She was vaguely conscious as they drove along that Mr. Barker was asking her questions and pointing out different objects. But she could neither answer nor observe; she could only suffer and be dumb.

It must not be supposed that she had during this long interval, of non-intercourse with him indulged in the imbecile hope of ever getting him back again. She had taught herself to believe the stern truth that as a lover he had left her for ever, out of either indifference or caprice, and she had schooled herself to look this truth in the face without flinching. She had even accustomed herself to the thought of his marrying some one, but this imaginary "some one" else she had always believed would be of the very highest order of womankind; would be, in fact, a fitting mate for a man whom she had endowed with all the grandest, man-like qualities. That he should have stepped down to carry on what looked very like an underhand flirtation with a girl who smirked and tossed her head, and gave sly meaning glances when

she spoke of him, and carried on a surreptitious correspondence with him, shocked and hurt her, and caused her to remember with a sense of burning shame that she had allowed this man to kiss her—so great had been her love for and trust in him! This man, who was now apparently playing a frivolous game which must end in his either wronging himself or wronging the one with whom he was playing it.

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At last the silence she was maintaining became oppressive to herself. Turning her head suddenly, fraught with the resolution to “say something,” to “try and be civil” to the companions who had come out to spend a happy day with her, she became aware that Mr. Barker’s eyes were fixed upon her with curious solicitude. The instinct of self-preservation made her cry out,—

“Take care, you’re too near the bank;” and so the ice was broken, for Dolly and the children, who were very tired of each other’s conversation in the background, bent forward now and joined in the hail-storm of chaff which fell on Barker’s unheeding ears about his careless driving.

“You’ve been staring at Miss Herries for ten minutes by my watch,” one of the children who had lately been given a wristlet watch, and who was proud to put her new possession prominently forward as a useful factor in the day’s arrangements, said; “quite ten minutes by my watch, and the old grey has just ‘loped’ along as he liked. Why did you stare like that at Miss Herries, Mr. Barker? She hasn’t got a smut on her nose.”

“I couldn’t help it and I didn’t try to help it,” he answered, with Hibernian candour and contrariety. Then they spoke of the mesmeric effect a fixed gaze has upon the one gazed at; and the necessity for catching the conversational ball and throwing it back quickly diverted Jane’s thoughts into a healthier, and happier channel. Every now and again the thought

of him engaged in unworthy dalliance with the commonplace little flirt who was now trying to re-absorb some of Mr. Barker's fugitive attentions would strike Miss Herries like a blow ; but she had mastered herself sufficiently, not only to be able to subdue all expression of pain by the time they landed at Mount Edgecombe, but also to be able to take a lively interest in what she saw, and to feel that she should not be at all sorry to see the hamper unpacked.

In fact, she had passed through the first keen pangs—the smarting, scorching pangs—of indignant, mortified, angry, helpless jealousy. Reason was beginning to reassert its sway, and she was taking herself to task for being a fool, and reminding herself that she had no earthly right or reason to feel aggrieved at anything Captain Stafford might do or leave undone when she was called upon to face another difficulty, and solve another problem.

CHAPTER ~~XII~~.

A WILD FLOWER.

DOLLY ABBOT had, very fortunately, Mr. Barker thought, met a group of young “old Plymouth friends” almost as soon as they landed. Two or three very young subalterns, escorting each other's sisters and cousins, were “a change from Mr. Barker, the tiresome children, and the odiously stuck-up governess,” Dolly told herself, so, after appointing an hour for luncheon, she walked away with her friends with the remark,—

“The children know the ropes here quite well, Jane, you needn't give yourself any trouble about them ; see, they're off already, greedy little things. They'll turn up safely enough when they're hungry, and they're sure to be that soon.”

“And you'll do the same, I suppose ? ”

“Of course I shall ; but till then you can do as you

like—you and Mr. Barker," she added in a whisper, as she ran off laughing.

"I'll take you to a jolly bench, where you will get a fine view. I suppose I *may* come with you, and stay with you, Miss Herries?" Barker said, and Jane was half-conscious of a certain wistfulness in his tone, and desire to be with her in his manner, which was vaguely pleasant to her.

"You may, certainly; we have come out to amuse each other for the day. Dolly and the children don't seem inclined to have anything to do with us," Jane answered cordially.

She could not help infusing a certain little air of tolerant kindness at times, and at others a slight—a *very* slight—touch of patronage into her manner to this young man. She tried to eliminate it, but there it was, and whenever she was conscious of having been guilty of either the tolerant kindness or the patronising air, she tried to make amends to him by being extra friendly and easily familiar, as she would have been with one of her equals.

Of course, she was to blame for these things, more especially for being the last, for that made her so dangerously misleading. It must be admitted, on the other hand, that Mr. Barker was endowed with that sanguine temperament which renders a man peculiarly liable to be misled. Moreover, he saw nothing but a pretty girl's transparent efforts to play at being the star to the male moths around her in her natural manner. And when she turned on the frank, friendly, "comrade" stop, he found her so closely resembling a dozen dear, lovely, fresh, free and utterly unconventional Irish girls whom he had left in their native fastnesses near Bantry, that he fell more head over ears in love with her than ever for their sakes.

Meanwhile, they were sauntering slowly towards one of the benches near the entrance to the Park. He amused her, for he was vivacious as well as adoring. He talked incessantly; told her of some of his earlier

aspirations and more recent disappointments all in a few minutes, and then he said,—

“I hardly know why I’ve told you all this ; only, somehow, I thought you’d like me better if you knew that I wanted to be a soldier, and that I passed all right enough into Sandhurst. But my uncle—he’s good to my mother and sisters—would have me nothing but a doctor. You don’t think much of doctors, now, do you ?”

Miss Herries looked at the handsome, lissom, spirited young fellow walking by her side, and bending devotionally towards her. Honestly, hitherto she had not “thought” very much of doctors. The few who had crossed her heedless path had been either old or uninteresting to her. But here, now, close to her side, was one who was quite outside all her previous experiences of the mere modern middle-class medicine man. A new-born respect for him and his profession flashed from her eyes as she answered,—

“I think that *you* are ready to do, and will do, just as much gallant, daring work as any soldier can do. I am sure that you have the pluck and endurance to win a—a—V. C., if one were given for medical services.”

He switched off the biggest frond of a beautiful and unoffending lady-fern before he spoke. The lady-fern was a handy object on which to vent the irritation he felt at Jane’s words of commendation.

“That’s just it, Miss Herries. A man may risk his life knowingly every day in my profession, and do it as cheerfully as any soldier does in the heat of a battle. But there’s no glory about the way in which we show ourselves ready to render up our lives. We may spend hours in a plague-stricken house, knowing that each breath we draw may impregnate us with deadly poison. The foes we fight can’t be fought with sword and rifle. The weapons *we* use we can never dare to lay down for a moment ; we must always be under arms. But it doesn’t strike

you, for instance, that there's any glory in the career, does it, Miss Herries?"

He was speaking excitedly, looking down upon her with his handsome face flushed, and an expression of proud defiance upon it that appealed to her own generously defiant nature.

"You think me a sillier girl than I am, Mr. Barker. I haven't known much practically of doctors or doctor's lives, but what you have been saying has made me remember some stirring lines on the same subject. They're by Clement Scott, you ought to know them; every doctor ought to know the 'Doctor's Dream.'"

"Tell them to me."

"I can't remember them all, but I can never forget some of the lines when he speaks of—

"The kindly voice of a dear old man who talked to us lads of the
men who heal,
Of the splendid mission in life of those who study the science
that comes from God,
Who buckle the armour of nature on, who bare their breasts and
who kiss the rod.
So the boy disappeared in the faith of the man, and the oats were
sowed; but I never forgot
There were few better things in the world to do, than to lose all
self in the doctor's lot."

She paused, panting a little from the unwonted excitement of reciting, nervously alive to all that had been faulty in her rendering of the lines, and desperately afraid that he might think her foolish, and fail to comprehend the subtle connection which existed between what he had been saying and the poem she had quoted. She knew that Florence, who would not have felt the tiniest fraction of what she was feeling, would have infused all sorts of wonderful meanings into the lines by the charm of her falsely sympathetic voice and manner. Whereas she (Jane) had, she was well aware, scrambled through them, sometimes too rapidly, sometimes too slowly, in a way that had robbed them of half their beauty. She felt gratefully relieved, therefore, when he said,—

"Go on! tell me more of it."

They had come to the bench by this time, and he motioned her to seat herself upon it as he spoke. Rather to her embarrassment, he flung himself on the grass at her feet. There was only one man in the world whom she desired to see in that position. Incidental men ought not to presume to show her that sort of homage, she felt. However, he had to the full as much right to the turf in Mount Edgecombe park as a resting-place as any other man who liked to sprawl upon it on public days. Accordingly she resigned herself to the situation, and taxed her memory for some more lines from the "Doctor's Dream."

"I've got them!" she exclaimed presently, after scribbling in a note book for a few minutes; "directly I began to write the first line, the rest came readily. Now you shall read them for yourself."

"Indeed, no, Miss Herries. I want to hear them from your lips first. I want to associate them with you entirely and alone. I shouldn't take in their meaning if I read them; you must speak them to me."

"Where can those children be? I ought to go and look after them."

"Ah! now, don't make the young Abbots hate you. Let them alone; they are entitled to their liberty to-day as much as we are, you know. Read the lines you have remembered; make me happy—for to-day, at least."

"If you'd get up and sit down I could do it, but I can't bear to be looked at when I'm reading; it makes me fidget, it makes me hot. If Fritz even fixes those pretty eyes of his on me when I'm reading aloud, I have to make him turn round. You must do the same, or you must get up from the grass, where you're catching cold, and sit down sensibly."

"I'll look straight up into the sky, I swear I will," he said, stretching himself flat on his back, and crossing his arms under his head; "if you were kind, you might put a little bit of your cloak just over me, to keep the draught away from my chin."

He took the hem of her fur-lined silk cloak in his hand, and pressed it against his lips. The sooner she read the lines she had promised to read to him the sooner this silly episode would be over, she felt. Accordingly, she launched herself again on the treacherous waves of verse.

"It's a country doctor's life he's writing about; just such a lot as you have chosen, you know," she began explaining, then she went on to read—

"So I left the life that had seemd so dear, to earn a crust that
 isn't so cheap,
 And I bought a share of a practice here to win my way and to
 lose my sleep;
 To be day and night at the beck and call of men who ail and
 women who lie,
 To know how often the rascals live, and see with sorrow the dear
 ones die.
 To be laughed to scorn as a man who fails, when nature pays her
 terrible debt;
 To give a mother her first-born's smile and leave the eyes of the
 husband wet.
 To face and brave the gossip and stuff that travels about through
 a country town;
 To be thrown in the way of hysterical girls, and live all terrible
 scandals down.
 To study at night in the papers, of new disease and of human ills,
 To work like a slave for a weary year, and then to be cursed when
 I send my bills!"

Her self-consciousness had vanished and she read the last few lines with a vigour that showed how well she understood and appreciated them. As she finished, she glanced down and saw the corner of her cloak being more warmly and kindly treated than before, while he was looking at her with eyes full of feeling for something beyond the poem.

"I shall never accuse you again of the folly of thinking a 'doctor's lot' an ignoble one. You couldn't have read that poem as you did if you had a contempt for its theme."

"I am glad you do me so much justice. I am very, *very* glad that you understand me."

"*Do* I understand you? I trust I do for if I do not

it will be the bitterest mistake I ever made in my life. Look here! Miss Herries! Jane!" he sat up suddenly, and took the hand that was holding the notebook, and as he did so, just a dozen yards in front of them, Lady Roydmore and Captain Stafford strolled leisurely by.

Helen was tired, and was walking as women are apt to walk when that is the case. Her head was bent down, her eyes were fixed on the ground, fatigue robbed her of all desire to gaze at the beauties of nature; and the majority of the human beings who were swarming over the place belonged to the masses, with whom she had no affinity, consequently she did not see the pair who were so near to her, and whose attitude as regarded each other was so ambiguous. But they were clearly visible to Captain Stafford, and for an instant he halted, the next—a bitter, scornful feeling of resentment against Jane, and detestation of the man who was sitting at her feet took possession of him. He checked the exclamation that had risen to his lips, and walked on by Lady Roydmore's side without giving Miss Herries the opportunity of bowing to him.

"That is my stepmother," Jane stammered out. "She didn't see me. I ought to go and speak to her."

Mr. Barker turned his head to look after the retreating pair.

"Don't interrupt them; they look happy enough," he laughed out merrily. "That's Captain Stafford with her, an awfully distinguished fellow, a V. C. and all that sort of thing; he's the finest looking fellow in the garrison."

"I know—I know him," Jane faltered. "He didn't see me; he didn't give me the chance of bowing to him."

"He stared hard enough at you," Mr. Barker said jealously, "but he didn't point you out to Lady Roydmore. They neither of them look very smart to-day, do they?"

"He *didn't* see me; he *couldn't* have seen me,"

Jane argued with agonised earnestness, unheeding Mr. Barker's remark. "If he had seen me he wouldn't have cut me ; why should he have cut me?"

"For the same reason that I should not 'see' any one who might interrupt us now," Mr. Barker said boldly. "I should look away from my own sister if by doing so I could keep you all to myself. Listen to me, Jane ; I must tell you——"

"Not now ! Oh, don't say anything now, *please* don't," Jane managed to say ; "and don't hold my hand, you're hurting it, and it's so silly."

She wrung her hand out of his as she spoke, and stood up nervous and trembling, more than half inclined to cry. The mere sight of the man she loved had unstrung her, and his careless air of disregard, forgetfulness, contempt—which was it?—stung her to the quick. The place, the man by her side, everything that environed her became loathsome to her at once. *He* had passed her by as if she did not exist for him. *He*, who had told her he loved her, and had kissed her as no other man ever had done or should do.

"He thinks me a weak, bad fool," she moaned in her heart. "He won't even take the trouble to be civil to a girl whom he despises, as he must despise me. Yet he ought to know better ! He ought to know that I have only been a fool with him."

Dolly's voice cut in upon her excruciatingly humbling reflections.

"Hi, Jane, where's the luncheon basket ? I've had such a lovely walk,"—she directed a thrilling glance at an enslaved lanky military youth by her side,—“and I've brought Mr. Wyndham back with me to have something to eat. Let me introduce Mr. Wyndham to you, Jane ; he knows some of your people ; don't you ? At least you said your uncle and aunt knew Lady Roydmore, and Lady Roydmore is your step-mother, I've found out. Where are the children ? Let us go and find the tiresome little wretches, and have some luncheon."

The quartette moved off in the direction of the little inn by the landing place at Cremyl, and again, sorely against her will, Miss Herries found herself coupled up, so to say, with Mr. Barker. He was in high spirits, for he thought he had made great way with her this day. He carried her cloak, and adhered to her side with a lover-like devotion that made the girl, whose head and heart were full of another man, feel sick. Dolly and her newly annexed swain loitered along behind, the former now and again shouting out little sentences of meaningless chaff that made Jane's blood boil, such as,—

“We are very sorry that hunger drove us to disturb you, Jane. I feel that Mr. Barker will never forgive us, but we will be very good-natured, and directly we've had luncheon we will go away again. I suppose you will try to see a little more of the place, won't you? I warn you that my uncle has a horrid habit of asking you all about a place you've been to. When he gives up Mr. Barker and the waggonette for the day for the amusement of his young people, as he calls them—I hate being lumped up with the children in that way—he expects in return a full account of all that we have seen and done. I can give a good account of myself. I've walked to Cawsand and back, and made a bad sketch of a boat. What have you done, Jane?”

“Sat on a bench and made a fool of myself,” Jane answered hastily. The moment she had spoken she repented herself of her words, for Mr. Barker was gazing at her with undisguised love and reproachfulness depicted on every feature of his handsome face, and Dolly was laughing maliciously.

“You should have come with us,” the latter cried dauntlessly; “*we* haven't made fools of ourselves, have we, Mr. Wyndham? We have only been having a prosaic walk and a platonic talk. Why, look, Jane, there are Lady Roydmore and Captain Stafford walking down to the steamer. How badly they are both groomed; I wonder they are not ashamed to stand

in the sunlight. Shall we run down and speak to them? It would be such a joke."

"I don't suppose they wish to see us," Jane murmured.

"That's where the joke would come in," Dolly laughed; but though she laughed, her usually pale cheeks were deeply tinged with the roses of angry consciousness. She was not at all in love with Captain Stafford. She never had felt, and never would feel, a particle of the deep emotion which stirred Miss Herries to the centre of her being. But she had set herself the task of "getting hold of Captain Stafford," as she phrased it, if he were to be got hold of by either direct attack or cautious undermining. Dolly would never love him, but she could feel passion for almost any man on the slightest provocation. It had been her aim lately to make him believe that it was only "her principles"—Dolly's principles!—which held her passion in check. If she could once get him to compromise her and himself, Dolly felt that the rest would be easy.

With this view she had entangled him into a correspondence with her—a correspondence that neither amused nor interested him, but which, nevertheless, he allowed to drift because it pleased the girl whom he was pleased to regard as a mere "nice, innocent child, whose life was a dull one." There was nothing serious about it on his side. He thought of her as his "wild flower," and would not have cared a bit if some other man had taken a fancy to pluck it. But the wild flower was of the woodbine or wild bryony order; if once her tendrils got twisted round a man's feet, he would find some difficulty in freeing himself. In fact, he never dreamt that in a game of gay fooling the wild flower could give him points, and still beat him easily.

"That's where the joke would come in. If you won't be civil enough to come with me, I shall go alone and speak to them."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A YOUNG MAN'S FANCY.

THE night of discomfort, and the long walk of the morning, the unsatisfactory condition of her toilette, and the knowledge that her pretty hands were getting embrowned by the sun, had all tended to reduce Lady Roydmore to a state of nerve-weariness and depression that made her unable to carry her head handsomely, and made her look ten years older than she was. She was feeling painfully conscious of a draggled dress and a hat that was rain-sodden out of all smartness. But she was still more painfully conscious that fatigue had brought out those telltale lines round the eyes and mouth which show that the glory of a woman's summer is going, that the sere and yellow of autumn is fast approaching for her.

They were walking languidly down towards the steamer, she silent from inanition, and a little from hurt vanity—every woman hates to look hideous unjustly, as the elements sometimes compel her to look; he silent also, and a little sulky because of that vision he had had of Jane in a becoming dress, in a becoming light under a tree, through whose spreading branches the sunbeams fell upon her in flecks of gold, with a handsome man sprawling at her feet. “Sprawling” was the word Captain Stafford used in describing the scene to himself. Had he been in Mr. Barker's position, he would have said probably that he was “stretched on the grass.” However, this is unimportant. It had annoyed him to see Mr. Barker where he was; accordingly, he liked to think of him as of one who sprawled in an ungainly way at an irresponsible woman's feet.

Into their meditations, their silence, their sulks,

whichever it might have been, came a light, merry voice with the words,—

“Lady Roydmore, I’ve been running yards after you. We *couldn’t* think it was you at first, looking so—so dismal, but directly I was sure I said to Jane I should run after you and make you come back and share our picnic. How d’ye do, Captain Stafford?” These last words with a long, under-the-lids glance at Captain Stafford, which he did not quite know what to do with, and which Lady Roydmore intercepted, and resented promptly.

“I am sorry you ran, Miss Abbot,” she said coldly. “Miss Herries is here, you say? I should have been glad to see her, but the steamer is just going; good-morning.”

She bent her head in the stiffest parting bow that it is possible for one woman to bestow upon another—buckram is limp in comparison to it—and passed on quickly to the steamer. As Captain Stafford was raising his hat to Dolly, and following, the wild flower sent out one of her detaining tendrils, and caught his arm.

“I’ve done nothing but cry since I saw you last, because you wouldn’t promise me that you would come and take me for a ride. Why did you make me want to go out and have walks and rides in the country roads—I hated them till you took me into them—if you weren’t going to keep it up? *Everything* about me is much duller than it was before I knew you. *Why* won’t you write to me? *Why* don’t you tell me that you love me when you do write? You do, I know, for you call me ‘dear Dolly,’ and your ‘wild flower.’ Oh, Harry, leave that hateful woman to go on by herself, and come back with me.”

He might have been moved to pity her, and make a fool of himself at this juncture, if he had not detected under all her apparent abandonment to the passion she was feigning a quick, clear, self-possessed adherence to the main chance. There was calcula-

tion, he felt, in the way even in which she called him "Harry"—with studied hesitation, not a bit in the irrepressible way in which his name would have burst from her lips if she had really been whirled on to utter it by the overwhelming torrent of genuine feeling.

"You had better go back to the other children," he laughed; but he was bitterly annoyed. "You have been emancipated from the schoolroom too soon. Now, good-bye; I must not leave Lady Roydmore any longer for the steamer may go at any moment."

He raised his deerstalker again, and left her, but Dolly was not a bit nonplussed, not even for a moment.

"Silly goose," she said to herself contemptuously, as she turned and walked back leisurely to rejoin her companions. "He thinks I don't know what I'm about. He thinks he has undesignedly won my virgin heart, and doesn't quite know what to do with the blessing. What idiots men are to write letters after a guest-night dinner, especially to 'wild flowers,' who don't very much care what happens so long as they get transplanted from their native country lanes."

She came back into the circle of her family and friends as these thoughts rushed through her brain, but she was cool and capable as ever.

"Oh, here all you children are," she said, addressing the young Abbots; "I thought a few of you were drowned, but that was Miss Herries' look-out, not mine. Your stepmother looked such an old frump, Jane, and Captain Stafford looked—well, as a man generally does look when he has to escort an old frump. Captain Stafford *can* be so charming when he is pleased; I've never seen him anything but charming till to-day, but to-day he was distinctly grumpy. I rather like to see a man grumpy when a woman drags him off against his will. It's a thing *I* never would do, but I think men deserve it when they're so weak. Now, Mr. Wyndham, you'd never be weak in that way. You'd never let me drag you——"

"Round the world if you like," he interrupted.

Dolly bridled and blushed. The art of blushing at will was one that she had cultivated from her earliest childhood. She had found it very efficacious at times in her progress through life. The blush, as a rule, was rather indicated than expressed. Dolly would clap her hands up to her cheeks, and lower her head suddenly, and bystanders understood by this that she was blushing. She went through this little pantomime, rather to the disgust of Miss Herries, who had witnessed the performance before, but greatly to Mr. Wyndham's edification. He thought her one of the "sweetest girls he had ever met," and was ready to offer to share a subaltern's pay and prospects with her on the spot. It struck him as quite a delightful coincidence that she should be called "Dolly," the pet abbreviation for Dorothy, which was his rich old aunt's name. With all his heart he wished he were a year older, that he might offer Miss Abbot a man's hand. Still, he felt reassuringly that she was just one of those dear girls who would wait for ever for a fellow she really cared for; and after this long, happy day in Mount Edgecombe, she probably would care very much for him, for she had already told him that she was quite heart-free, and that she "never flirted like the Plymouth girls."

"Let us keep together this afternoon," Jane whispered to Dolly after their picnic luncheon; "I don't like going off in pairs, let us keep together, Dolly."

Dolly grinned.

"Has Mr. Barker been too demonstrative?" she asked. "My dear Jane, I should have thought you knew how to keep inflammable young men in check. Now, Mr. Wyndham has behaved like a lamb. I could lead him by a single hair, but I make him keep his distance. He is such a nice boy! He says I remind him of a copy of the Blue Madonna that his uncle has at their place at Redhill. Quite a lovely place, he says, and he's the only nephew. What's

the Blue Madonna like, do you know? Some of the pictures of the Madonna make one squirm."

"I never saw the Blue Madonna; but I think you may rest satisfied that Mr. Wyndham is making a mistake in thinking you like her. Are you going to be agreeable, Dolly, and let us all keep together for the rest of the day?"

"I never kept all together for a day if I could get a man to myself in my life. What's the good of keeping together? It tongue-ties the men. I must confess your presence wouldn't tongue-tie *me*, Jane, for I can talk by signal as well as by my lips; but it will be dull for you, because you won't be in the swim with Mr. Wyndham and me; and Mr. Barker will be afraid to say much to you."

"I don't want him to say anything to me; I will keep the children with me."

"Poor Jane!" Dolly laughed mockingly. "Is that the best you can do with a fine day? Why, you can 'keep the children with you' when it's pouring with rain and you in the schoolroom. You *are* silly not to enjoy yourself when you can. I believe—yes, I really do believe—that you are hurt and fretting because Captain Stafford wouldn't come back to speak to you. Now, if I had wanted him to come with me ever so much (which I didn't), I wouldn't have shown it. He would have given *anything* for an excuse to get away from Lady Roydmore, but I wasn't going to help him to one. The fact is, I didn't want him to-day; I infinitely prefer that young Wyndham."

"Come along, children, you won't desert me, will you?" Jane said, stifling with anger, unfounded jealousy and mortification. She did not believe one quarter of Dolly's insidiously malicious insinuations; at the same time, there was gall and wormwood for her in the sound of them.

The little Abbots were no better, no nobler than others of their age and class. They had been having a free, happy, unfettered time down among the dancing waves all the morning. They had made them-

selves wet and grubby without let or hindrance from any one in authority, and they did long to repeat the experience. Accordingly now, when Jane appealed to them for their companionship, they gave a wild whoop, and ran off shouting,—

“All very fine! You deserted us in the morning; tit for tat, tit for tat; shan’t stay with you now.”

“I should let them alone if I were you, Jane,” Dolly said contemptuously, as she strolled off with Mr. Wyndham. “They always tell tales if they’re interfered with. *I* never interfere with *them*, and I take good care that they have the nastiest pudding cook can make (and she is skilful at making nasty puddings) if *they* interfere with *me*. You had better follow my example.”

Jane’s eyes followed her adviser as the latter tripped off gaily with her slave for the day at her side. Miss Herries was feeling rather more sick and sore than she had ever felt in her life. She had never counted on Dolly’s fidelity or loyalty, but she had believed that the children would have stood by her and stayed with her, instead of which they were scampering in devious directions, dividing their forces for the purpose of foiling her if she went in pursuit.

“I am not fit to combat these people,” she told herself bitterly. “They have no refinement, no consideration. Even the children are selfish and cruel.”

It stung her as if he had struck her with a lash, or uttered the bitterest reproach, a moment after, when Mr. Barker, who had been busy repacking the luncheon basket, said,—

“I am sure you are tired, Miss Herries. I know you would rather just sit down alone and have a read than be bothered with any one talking to you. See! I’ve got the *London Figaro* and *Society* in my pocket. The gossip may amuse you till the children are tired of mud-larking, and Dolly Abbot is tired of Mr. Wyndham. I’ll just go right off and smoke a pipe quietly.”

“You *are* kind,” Jane said, taking his papers, and

giving him a look of such intense gratitude that he nearly forfeited it on the spot by staying with her. However, considering he really was very much in love, and very earnest about carrying his love to a successful issue, he acted on this occasion with rare discretion. He went off to smoke, leaving Jane alone to fret over the inevitable, to fidget about the wayward children, who would not come when she called them; to find the *Figaro* stupid, and *Society* scandalous; to feel very solitary and neglected, and, above all, to miss him.

Dolly spent the shining hours to what she considered much better advantage. The boy by her side—he was only twenty, but a man's heart beat in his big, athletic young body—was as wax in the hands of the girl who was well accustomed to the manipulation of man in all stages of his development. If she had any personal prejudices against the physique of the one who was currently to be conquered, she had a wonderful way of concealing them. She could smile up into the face of a satyr, gush effusively at a gorilla, fawn upon and flatter any one if she fancied it would pay. How much easier was it, therefore, to do any and all of these things in the case of such a goodly youth as Mr. Wyndham? Before he knew that he was counting his chickens before they were hatched, he had laid bare all his hopes and expectations concerning his uncle and aunt. He had told Dolly whose was the photograph he had hitherto worn in his locket, and declared his intention of dethroning that photograph in favour of one of hers; and he had pressed on her acceptance a ring which was much too large for her.

“You shall write and ask me prettily for my photograph; mind, if you don't ask *very* prettily for it, you sha'n't have it. And you don't think I am going to keep this ring, do you? Why, people would think I was engaged.”

“Why won't you be engaged to me?” he asked hotly.

“You don’t know what you are talking about.”

“I do ; and I know what I mean too, and that’s more to the purpose. I mean that I’ll get engaged to you, and tell every one of my people, and marry you right off the reel if you’ll have me.”

“You dear, nice boy,” Dolly said slowly ; “it’s so easy to say that, but I *know* you don’t mean it. You think I am a silly girl, whose head will be turned by your flattery. Of course I *am* flattered ; I can’t help being that. But you shouldn’t laugh at me, and try to make sport of me.”

Then, naturally, he swore many things which he had not thought of five minutes before, and it ended in Dolly’s granting him permission very reluctantly, and after much solicitation, to write to her.

“But you mustn’t come out to call yet for a long time. I must have time to think of lots of things before I let you come out. Aunt is a perfect dragon. She can’t bear any one to look at me, and my uncle always listens to her. So you won’t come, will you, till I give you leave ?”

This made him feel very manly and determined. The “Young Lochinvar’s” sensations set in strongly as soon as he heard that her aunt was a dragon. Neither bolt nor bar should keep him from his own true love, he told himself and her as he walked along by her side ; and Dolly looked at him with trusting, wide-open eyes and parted lips.

“You will write to me too, won’t you, Dolly ?” he pleaded, when Dolly had given certain directions about his epistles, such as, he was “to be sure and use *plain* envelopes ; if he used the regimental ones, the servants would gossip about them.”

“I don’t think I’ll write,” sagacious Dolly replied ; “you see I shouldn’t be able to say much about myself, and you wouldn’t care to hear about a lame pet crow and the poultry. Besides, I won’t give myself away by writing to you till I know that you mean what you say ; till I feel *quite* sure you’re not laughing at me.”

“If you doubt me, I’ll write and tell my uncle to-night what I want, and what I mean. He won’t treat me like a boy ; he will believe that I know my own mind. And as soon as I get his answer I’ll come out and speak to your uncle.”

“You won’t do that till I give you leave. Why, I haven’t said ‘yes,’ or anything like it, yet. I suppose you think I ought to jump at you? But I won’t, because I feel almost sure you’ll repent and alter your mind. Don’t stamp and get impatient. How *can* I think you mean it while you keep that thing in your locket?”

The hitherto prized photograph of one whom he had loved wildly in the days of his bygone youth, six months ago, was torn from its setting in a moment, and offered humbly to the winds in little bits in Dolly’s honour, at Dolly’s dictation.

“Now I feel better, for I trust you a little—ever so little—bit more, Mr. Wyndham.”

“Don’t call me Mr. Wyndham ; call me by my first name.”

“What is your first name?”

“Paul.”

She made a face expressive of disapprobation.

“Haven’t you another? No ; well, I shall go on calling you Mr. Wyndham till I know you better. Paul is a name not to be lightly spoken. And now, we will go back to Miss Herries and the others. And remember, when you write to me use plain envelopes, and don’t expect me to answer your letters, for I *know* you’re only joking.”

CHAPTER ~~XXXIV.~~ XII.

A LADY-LIKE ROGUE.

FOR three or four days after the young people's picnic, there was a good deal of the dismal pervading the atmosphere at Plym Tor. By way of toning down the exuberant spirits which had been caused by one day of warmth and sunshine in the west of England, dreary rain, accompanied by bleak east winds, set in for a week or two. The moral tone got lowered and limp. It is utterly impossible for a family circle, meeting daily for say ten days, in rain-bound condition, unrelieved by the presence of a stranger, to maintain an air of calm domestic cheerfulness, much less of innocent hilarity. The loving and busy, devoted mother of a family of young children has the best of it on these occasions. She can always employ the spare time that might otherwise hang heavily on her hands in devising new pastimes for the fractious and insatiable youngsters. There are some women who positively revel in the calls made upon their ingenuity and endurance by the restless autocrats of the nursery and schoolroom during a lengthened interval of indoor life. They fail to see that their offspring are adding new cares to those which the weather has already inflicted upon the other occupants of the house. They not only think it ill-natured, but short-sighted and oblivious of the privileges which might be theirs on the part of others who hold aloof, or scowl upon the unfortunate darlings. Mrs. Abbot was a mother of this type. Her children never troubled, bored or annoyed her. It was, therefore, more in sorrow than in anger that she saw Dolly snub her aggressive young cousins whenever they

approached her with the plea that "she would play musical chairs, or dumb crambo, or the piano, or build card houses, or do something to 'muse them."

There was a good deal of stinging asperity in the snubs she administered to those to whom she dared "let out a bit of her real nature and feelings." Dolly was dull, and impatient for something to happen which seemed to her to be hanging fire. Whenever Dolly was rather dull and impatient, she was more than rather cross. Whenever she was cross, she snubbed her cousins remorselessly, and if they complained, she took care that they had a course of wholesome, unappetising puddings, that were repugnant to their young palates.

Her curiosity was excited, too, by seeing that Miss Herries received in the course of a week three or four letters from her step-mother. These letters were carefully sealed with red wax, and impressed with Lady Rodymore's crest, so there was no possibility of their coming open by accident, and delivering up their contents to Miss Abbot. This was vexatious, for Dolly really hungered after a knowledge of their contents. As Jane neither went into Plymouth nor expressed any desire to go, Dolly took it for granted that she (Miss Herries) had not been invited by her step-mother. But in this she was mistaken. Helen had used every persuasion in her power to induce Jane to visit her, if only for a day. But Jane steadily refused, pleading as her excuse that the brief relapse into a bit of the old life might make her dissatisfied with the new one of dull, unsympathetic work and duty. In reality, she shrank from a meeting with Captain Stafford. It was better never to see him at all, she now felt, than to see him so altered and so utterly lost to her.

Moreover, various obstacles, trifling in themselves, but momentous when heaped together, stood in the way of her accepting Lady Roydmore's invitation. In the first place, the bloom was off her toilette, and she had no immediate means of renewing it. The

delicious aroma of freshness had fled from her boots and gloves, from the flowers in her hat, and from the dozen little accessories, any failure in which Captain Stafford would be quick to discern. She hated being shabby, as every nice girl ought to hate that evil condition. But she lacked the power of saying "no," and so all her poor little spare cash had gone to Florence, who, according to her own showing, was constantly having a hand-to-hand tussle with penury. Then, in addition, to this she knew that, kind and motherly and considerate as Mrs. Abbot was, that lady was more especially these things to her own children. She would not have refused a holiday to Miss Herries, but she would have felt that the delightful picnic day at Mount Edgecombe ought to last for some time. The children were the first consideration, the first and the middle and the last, and it was the children's due that their governess should be in the way to amuse when she was not engaged in instructing them.

"It's not as if Dolly were good-natured and willing to lay herself out to divert the dear little things in Miss Herries' absence," the mother said to herself and her husband, who was not listening to her. "As it is, I am quite pleased to see that Miss Herries is *quite* contented to stay at home."

At home she seemed likely to stay for some time if her outgoings were to be governed by Dolly's actions. Dolly was as likely to lay herself out to divert the young Abbots as she was to discover the North-West passage. She detested being even a spectator of the romping games which their mother encouraged on the score of their health when they could get no out-door exercise. They made the room untidy, knocked the dust out of the carpet, and got so hot that they felt clammy when they inadvertently collided with her.

"If I had my way, I'd tie them all up in a sack, and throw them into the duck-pond," she said savagely to Miss Herries, one evening when the healthy

parlour-sports had been unduly prolonged. The children had been extra playful on this occasion. They had caught moths and drowsy blue-bottle flies, of which they were not at all afraid, and had set these obnoxious beasts at liberty on Dolly's fringe, and on the back of her neck. They had dragged some of her best frocks from their sacred recesses in her drawers, and "dressed up in them" for the more efficient rendering of impromptu characters. They had interrupted her fifty times while she was gloating over a "Plain Tale from the Hills," that ought to have made her blood curdle. They had found out a box of French chocolate which one of her *attachés* had presented to her, and fed themselves generously therewith. Finally they kissed her with mouths that were smeared with jam and cake before going off at last, mercifully, to bed. No wonder Dolly wished them in the duck-pond.

"They're not bad as children go," Jane said, with the tolerance of supreme indifference; "they're not spiteful; they don't tell stories, and they never hurt an animal if they know it. I'll untie the sack and hook them out of the duck-pond if you throw them in," she added laughingly, as Dolly hesitatingly followed her into a retreat which Jane had hitherto kept sacred to herself—her bedroom.

An oil lamp was burning in the room—a mismanaged oil lamp, which had got out of order, and was sending its sickening fumes out distressingly. Trifles affect us more than serious matters. The odour of that oil lamp caused Miss Herries to wish that she had never been born, and to exclaim,—

"If I could throw the lamp and the one who trims it into the duck-pond, I'd do it this instant——"

"That would be aunt," Dolly interrupted suavely. "She potters about in the pantry half the morning with lamp scissors and dirty bits of rag and flannel, and tins that are oozing out all over with pungent oils. That's what your domestic, excellent manager does when she is turned out to grass. I wonder how

you will like the life, Jane? I wonder how you'll stand it?"

"Like what?—stand what?"

"My dear Jane, if I have been premature, please forgive me. Only I thought that the way you went on with Mr. Barker the other day at Mount Edgecombe meant something. *Naturally* I thought it meant something. How could I suppose that a nice girl like you would absent herself for hours with a man unless she——"

"Oh, Dolly, don't, don't!" Miss Herries cried.

"Well, I won't, after I've had one little say," said Dolly. "I can only tell you that Mr. Barker is moving heaven and earth—which means his relations and bankers—to get uncle to take him into partnership. Poor Mr. Barker! I can only say poor Mr. Barker if you have humbugged him. But, of course, if there's another man in the background—well, I suppose you know what you are about."

"There is no other man in the background," Miss Herries said stiffly.

"Then I need not say 'poor Mr. Barker.'"

"Certainly not; you need not say anything."

"You're *sure* that I need not pity Mr. Barker?"

"Sure, quite sure."

Jane spoke rapidly and emphatically, as one who desires to close a subject is apt to speak.

"I mean—I *do* want to be friendly and nice to you, Jane, though you have held me at arms' length—I mean that I am glad you are not playing fast and loose with Mr. Barker; he *is* such a good fellow. Captain Stafford will be glad too; he takes quite an interest in you, and he has heard from some one that Mr. Barker is very much yours to command. I know he will be *awfully* pleased when I write and tell him you are really meaning it with Mr. Barker."

"I think we will say good-night. I think I shall feel too much ashamed of myself to sleep if I let myself listen to you a moment longer. I think, if I were a man, I'd never speak civilly to a girl for

fear she should misunderstand and appropriate me against my intention."

"Which only means," said Dolly languidly, drawing her lissom form up from the bed on which she had been stretched, and making for the door, "which only means that you want me to tell Captain Stafford that you have no desire to collar Mr. Barker. Well, my dear, I shall not tell him anything of the kind. In the first place, because he would not care for the information; and in the second place, because it would not be true. Good-night, Jane; what a jolly time we might have together if you would only be a sensible girl, and not cry for the moon."

The thoughts which kept young, healthy Miss Herries awake for two or three hours that night were not pleasant. It made her tingle with a sensation very near akin to shame, that Dolly should have been so near the mark in her guesses at truth as to have fathomed Jane's "unrequited" infatuation for Captain Stafford. It disgusted her that she should have allowed herself to listen to Dolly's idle, school-girlish chatter about spurious loves and imaginary lovers. Above all, it gave her the feeling of being caught in a strong net that Dolly should persist in pretending to believe that there was anything like an understanding between Mr. Barker and herself (Jane).

But in the morning these thoughts were abruptly dispelled by a letter she received from Florence—a letter edged and sealed with black, indited with exquisite caution and neatness; a letter which clearly showed that Florence had cast herself for a new part in the drama of life, and that she had "got in" to this part as closely as if it were her skin.

The letter was written from a Brighton hotel, and Jane read it with interest, but, at the same time, with a feeling of nearly the whole of it being as unreal as a chapter from a new novel. One or two of the facts mentioned were true, doubtless, but the spirit of fiction pervaded the rest of it.

The elder sister was unusually affectionate in her mode of address.

“MY DEAREST JANE,—Your sympathetic little heart will mourn for me when I tell you that I am a widow. It is the sad truth. Yet why should I say ‘sad,’ when my poor darling Geof’s life had ceased to be a joy to either himself or me? He died ten days ago, babbling, the doctors and keepers tell me, of his happy home and loving wife to the last. It is a *great* satisfaction, to me, even in these first days of my heavy affliction, to think that I did everything to make his painful lot more bearable. Money has never been spared. No one but myself will ever know what sacrifices I have made in order that his condition should be ameliorated as far as possible.” (“She must have got hold of a ‘Complete Letter-writer,’” Jane thought, when she read as far as this.)

“I must not, however,” Mrs. Graves went on, “distress you further by dwelling on the sad, sad tragedy which has closed dear Geof’s life and darkened mine. I will try to dwell on what is still left to me of brightness in this world. I told you I have been at Brighton for several weeks ; but I have not told you that I have, while here, made the acquaintance, and, I am proud to say, secured the friendship of some dear people who have taken the widow and fatherless to their large, warm hearts. Mr. and Miss Wyndham are people whom it elevates the most frivolous-minded to know. I *more* than know them; I love them dearly, and long to dedicate my life to their service. He is the same Mr. Wyndham who injured his knee one day when he came to call on our dear mamma. He speaks so sweetly of Lady Roydmore, and has given me a much higher opinion of her than I ever had before. As for his sister, Miss Wyndham, or ‘Aunt Dorothy,’ as she lets me call her, she is one of those perfect women nobly planned whom I have always longed to meet.

“For the present, I am to live with these dear

friends, so you need not be anxious about me. They have already made me feel that I should be acting an unworthy part if I surrendered myself entirely to grief for my lost Geoffrey. Write to me, my dear sister, and cheer me by telling me that you too are happy in the path of duty, and the exercise of those gifts which Heaven has endowed you with.—Your loving and resigned sister,
FLORENCE."

Jane put down this letter and laughed. She could not profess to feel sorrow for poor Geoffrey's death, and it struck her as being a humourous thing that Florence should have taken the trouble to write her such a long and transparently mendacious an epistle.

"She has every reason to think me a fool, but why should she be such a rogue as to try to deceive me about her feelings for Geoffrey, and these new friends of hers? She *knows* I shan't believe one word of this letter—excepting the statement that Geoffrey is dead. Why should she have taken the trouble to do it? It will never occur to her to release me from the enforced exercise of the gifts Heaven has endowed me with, I suppose, nor will she make an effort to let me have part, at least, of my income, or to redeem my pearls. Why should she have taken the trouble to write me this letter?"

The answer to this conundrum was an easy one, only Jane could not guess it. Florence had written that letter and shown it confidingly to Miss Wyndham, in order that the dear, deluded old lady might repeat its contents to her equally credulous brother.

"We are rather a singular family, I flatter myself," Lord Roydmore wrote to his youngest sister, a few days after this. "I have been down to see Florence, in order to try and make her behave with common honesty towards you now the money is no longer wanted for poor Graves. But she baffled me completely by declaring that she and you have a private understanding. She is playing the mourning widow

so charmingly, that if she hadn't been my own sister she would have taken me in. The Wyndhams seem to regard her as something between a goddess and a saint, and she has evidently made them believe me to be a most unnatural brother. I am to be married very quietly on Thursday next. Geoffrey Graves' death will account for none of my own family being present. The fact is, my future wife hates Florence, and would see her die in a ditch rather than extend a friendly finger towards her. I shall be very glad when you come to your senses, and then we shall see you, of course."

"I think we are a singular family," Jane said to herself ruefully, "but I seem to be the only one who suffers through the singularity."

.

During these days while Jane had been absorbed with these family matters—for Florence insisted on her sister writing to her constantly—Dolly Abbot had been hatching and maturing a small plot with much art and skill. Lady Roydmore, it may be mentioned, had gone down to Cornwall for a month to make herself acquainted with the Lizard and Land's End districts, taking with her a promise from Captain Stafford that he would get a week's leave and drive his chestnuts down to any place in which she might be tenting at the time.

"And if I can persuade her to come, Jane shall be with me while you are there," Helen said to him ; and she meant it, too. But Captain Stafford shook his head at this. He had already heard that Miss Herries had succumbed to the fascinations and importunities of the young Irish doctor, and, painful as this rumour was to his vanity, he believed it.

CHAPTER ~~XXXV~~ XIII.

DOLLY WINS.

It was a busy, an unusually busy, time in the always fully occupied household of the country doctor. An obsolete competitor had retired from an opposition practice, and Dr. Abbot's clients had multiplied themselves by scores—by hundreds, even, it was averred. A new wing was being added to the house, and was to be fitted up as a consulting-room, and Dr. Leonard Barker had been taken into partnership, and gone into a residence of his own hard by.

The furnishing and decoration of the consulting-room was giving Mrs. Abbot full and agreeable occupation. She was determined that it should be a model consulting-room, a room where harmony of colour, perfection of form, and delicacy of detail should combine to make every artistically-minded person in the neighbourhood feel impelled to go into it and consult one of the firm of Abbot & Barker. She drew elaborate plans of the room, and sent them to the infallible oracles who presided over the "Home Decoration" department of all the ladies' journals. She got stacks of pattern-books of wall-papers, and bales of specimens of curtain stuffs from every eminent furnishing shop in town. And after doing these things, she finally decided to get everything from Parkhouse in Plymouth; with the result that her decision was justified by the effect produced.

The doctor's wife was essentially a stay-at-home woman. Long drives, unless they were taken in the cause of returning duty calls, seemed to her a pernicious waste of time. In fine weather she spent a

good deal of time in the garden with the children and the broken-winged crow.

Her house duties were onerous, and she fulfilled them all admirably, in spite of Dolly's jeer about trimming the lamps. A day's shopping in Plymouth she regarded as a serious waste of time, especially as Dolly could, when she chose, shop with equal discrimination. Now, when furniture was required for the new consulting-room, Dolly volunteered to relieve her aunt of the task of selecting it with amiable ardour. Consequently she was told off to this service gladly by Mrs. Abbot, and she fulfilled her task prudently, deliberately and well.

"Take your time about choosing things ; don't be hurried. I would rather you went in a dozen days following than that you should take something not quite suitable, because you won't wait till they can send for it," Mrs. Abbot counselled ; and Dolly took this counsel to heart, and did not permit herself to be hurried in the least.

She easily found an excuse for letting Captain Stafford know that she would be in Plymouth on a certain day. The ostensible motive for her writing to him was to ask him if he could give her Mrs. Dick Stafford's address. She mentioned the shop, and the hour at which she would be in it on the following day, and added, "I shall save a mail by posting my letter in Plymouth, so if you can send Lily's address to me there, I shall be very grateful to you."

As she surmised when she wrote this, he brought the address to her himself, and then helped the "poor little girl," who was so "dreadfully afraid her aunt would not be pleased with her taste" to choose wall papers. They got quite intimate and friendly again over this work. Dolly deferred to his opinion, and relied on him to back her up if her alarming aunt should disapprove of her choice, in a perfectly pathetic manner. He found the work boring after a time, and then he proposed giving Dolly some luncheon, and taking her for a drive afterwards.

He proposed this latter exploit in thoughtless idleness, much as he would have proposed to give a child a ride on one of his horses, or anything else that might amuse it, if the child had come in his way. But Dolly was quite alive to the power of appearances, and knew that Captain Stafford would be made to feel the weight of these latter if she agreed to his proposition. In fact, she counted the cost of every step she took, and every step she led him to lead her to take, and added up the sum-total of what it would all come to very correctly. She did not miscalculate one iota of the weight of the influence of public feeling as it was expressed in the faces of the majority of the people who knew him, and guessed at her, as he took her for this first ill-starred (for him) drive. She returned stares of surprise and condemnation with ones of easy defiance, and chatted and laughed up into his face with a cheerful familiarity that set people talking about the possibility, but improbability, of his being as much her property as he appeared to be.

This first drive was but the forerunner of many. Dolly was so innocently regardless of the view that might be taken of her conduct, that (as she amused him for the time) he had not the heart to undeceive her, nor the self-command to put an end to their compromising intercourse. Before he realised what he was about, he was looked askance at by people who had hitherto cringed to him. This roused his mettle, and made him more pronounced in his attentions to the "poor little girl," who had not a thought "beyond the amusement of the hour." Then Dolly contrived to drop half hints as to her own and his proceedings at home, and to look happily conscious and perfectly satisfied when her uncle, who heard of these escapades too late to check them, spoke to her severely, and warned her of her folly. Dolly wrote a piteous account of this reprimand to Captain Stafford, impressing upon him that through what had happened she would probably lose the only home and only friends she had in the world. By the same post he received

a letter from the irate uncle, who was a gentleman, and an honourable man, and who had no idea of having one of his kith and kin treated "as men of your calibre think they may treat unprotected girls with impunity," Doctor Abbot wrote. The colonel of his regiment found himself forced to take unwilling notice of the unpleasant rumours that arose. Dolly's own conduct added fuel to the fire of these rumours, for she became ill and hysterical, and cried aloud for him "to come to her and take her away," till his name became a household word at Plym Tor, and a by-word in the village. Common humanity, combined with contempt for all who were accusing him and condemning her, led him to put an end to the local scandal by offering to do all in his power to repair the mischief done by his want of thought. He professed no love for Dolly; but if they thought he ought to marry her, and she wished him to do it, he would make her his wife, he said, reluctantly and sulkily enough in an interview with her uncle. As Dolly declared she would die if Harry did not realise the hopes he had raised, Dr. Abbot accepted the offer on her behalf, and Captain Stafford went forth, feeling that he had acted "honourably," and that he was a doomed man.

Dolly took care that the announcement of the engagement should be in the local papers the next day. She gloried in the position, and she took care that all men should be apprised of it. It was immaterial to her now that the man who was openly pledged to her should be cold as ice to her, miserable in himself, and very much disposed to shun his fellow-men. She had fought with and worsted the hero who had won the V. C. She had a feeling of contempt for him as a moral coward, who had been conquered by her shallow devices and false pretences. Her unstable fancy, indeed, in these days veered round to young Wyndham, who still believed in her, and who daily wrote long letters of passionate protestation and appeal to her. She showed these letters to Harry Stafford when he came to play the unwilling lover's sick-

ening part, and laughed as she saw how he revolted at the sight of them. She triumphed openly over Jane, who was half stunned by the turn affairs had taken, and proposed that, after the marriage, which was to take place immediately, they should go down into Cornwall, and give his "dear friend, Lady Roydmore, a pleasant surprise." She astounded him by the knowledge she revealed of many things of which he had believed her to be profoundly and innocently ignorant. But he was bound in honour to her now, and he could not go back.

He was man enough to admit that he was caught in the net of his own idle, meaningless gallantries, as hundreds of other men have been caught. But the admission did not make him one whit the happier. He knew that the majority did not accredit him with having been a free agent in the matter, but looked upon him as a cajoled, coerced, beaten, baffled man. He knew that he was spoken of as "having done the right thing at last under pressure." He knew that Dolly was regarded as being more faulty than she was in reality ; and he could not put these crooked matters straight, because every effort he made to excuse only accused himself more strongly.

If he had ever been blinded by passion for her, his case would have been a less hard one ; but he had never been even so much as mildly in love with her. He had, in short, toyed with a kitten, who had suddenly leapt upon and devoured him. The thought that he would have to pass the rest of his life with her made him curse her and himself at times.

There was a good deal of speculation rife among those who did not know the man, as to whether he would not bolt before the wedding day ; but he was resolved to go to the altar as he would have gone to the scaffold, unflinchingly. The sight and the sound of the preparations that were being made for these happy nuptials nearly gave him brain-fever. But Dolly enjoyed them, and would not spare him a single detail concerning them.

He found himself, too, treated with cool reserve by Dr. Abbot, and this was as incomprehensible as it was unpleasant to him, for Dr. Abbot had been the one to put the extreme pressure upon him which had resulted in the engagement. It had been Dr. Abbot who had interviewed his (Stafford's) colonel, and the immediate outcome of this interview had been that the colonel had treated him coldly, and had advised, in tones that savoured strongly of a command, that Captain Stafford should either marry the young lady upon whom and her family he had brought the breath of scandal to blow, or send in his papers. Captain Stafford had thought the whole treatment of what he had considered to be a mere idle flirtation exaggerated to the last degree. But he was in the coil, and, without sacrificing the whole of his career, he could not get out. He little thought that it was the artful misrepresentation of the girl whom he still believed to be guileless which had entwined him in these subtle chains. He little knew how audaciously Dolly had defamed herself, as well as him, for the sake of carrying her point.

It was part of the expiation for his folly during this purgatorial period that he had to meet Miss Herries frequently. The iron had entered very deeply into Jane's soul when she heard the news that was so humbling and so terrible to her. She, of course, knew nothing of the traps that had been laid, and the pressure that had been put upon Captain Stafford, for the Abbots kept their own counsel very closely, and no local gossip ever reached her ears. To her it seemed that he had surrendered willingly, and as Dolly painted glowing pictures of his warmth and devotion to her, Jane was constrained to believe that he really did love the little mass of insincerity and double-dealing whom he had chosen for his wife. Indeed, what other motive than love for her could have influenced him, for he had nothing to gain, and much to lose, by what all his own set would regard as a *mésalliance*.

Miss Herries had a good deal of courage, and she required all she had at her command when she was compelled to meet him in the Abbot family circle. That he was, though "in" it, not "of" it was very obvious. All the gay frankness of manner which had so attracted her when she knew him first was gone, and in its place she met a reserved, brooding man, who went through his duty visits in a way that would have been heartrending to a more sensitive betrothed than Dolly.

From the first, Miss Herries adopted the manner of never either seeking him or shunning him, a difficult part for a woman to play properly, when her every thought is given with tenderness to a man. He thought her heartless for this, yet in this course which she pursued lay her only chance of safely keeping her secret, which, if it had been divulged, even then might have saved him.

He had not written to tell Lady Roydmore of his abasement, and as she never looked at a local paper, she had not seen it there. It annoyed her that, as Jane had agreed to go and spend a week with her at The Lizard, Harry Stafford should not have responded to her invitation to be there at the same time. But that he would come Helen never doubted, and she prepared herself to see him and Jane very happy together. Lady Roydmore had battled with her love for him, using her strong common sense and feeling for the fitness of things as her weapons against her love. It would be quite in the right order of things that Harry Stafford and Jane Herries should come to a fair understanding, and arrange to journey through life together. Helen schooled herself honestly and honourably to play the fair, elder-sisterly part to them both, and meant to be very proud of the match which she was determined should be made. In fact, the only feeling of anything approaching to soreness with regard to these people now, was that Captain Stafford should see fit to assume an air of indifference to the prospect of meeting Miss Herries, by not reply-

ing to the invitation for him to do so. It was incomprehensible to her that he should not write, he who had never failed to answer her letters. But not even a dim suspicion of the direful truth dawned upon her till Jane came.

The visit had been well timed. Miss Herries was able to avoid the wedding, which, as far as her feelings were concerned, would have been like applying a red-hot iron to an aching wound. The red-hot iron application may be a certain cure, but it is an extremely drastic measure to take, and one which even moderately heroic humanity may be forgiven for shrinking from. Accordingly, Jane went down into Cornwall on the eve of Captain Stafford's wedding day, and Dolly drove her to the station, and talked about him and the happiness in store for herself (Dolly) the whole way.

It had never occurred to Jane that Lady Roydmore could be anything but fully cognisant of what had been going on, and of the way in which these "goings-on" had culminated. She believed that Helen knew all about it, in fact, and therefore, when the latter met her step-daughter with outstretched arms and the words: "My dear Jane, it was time you had a change. I'll give you such a happy time, my child, I and Harry Stafford together," there was no *malice prepense*, no desire to give Lady Roydmore a startling surprise, in Jane's reply.

"Surely you know that to-morrow is his wedding day? He will have no time for any one but Dolly now."

"His wedding day! Dolly!"

Lady Roydmore had staggered back to a seat. The few words she spoke seemed to be uttered in a sharp paroxysm of pain. There was no deception about it. If she had been trying to portray dismay, disappointment and chagrin that nearly choked her, she could not have done it nearly so artistically as she did in the first outburst of her surprise and distress.

"He has not told you? Then it's worse than I thought, and he is ashamed of it all, ashamed of himself already. Shall I tell you as much as I know? It's not much, but I should like to get it over, and then let the subject drop. Shall I tell you?"

They were seated opposite to each other, by the side of a warmth-conveying fire. Jane was bending towards it, holding her chilled hands out to its comforting blaze. Helen had thrown herself back in her chair, with her elbows and hands resting on its arms. There was despondency and a vague yearning for comfort in Jane's attitude; Lady Roydmore's expressed prostration under a sudden blow.

"Tell me," she answered briefly.

"I haven't much to tell. About three weeks ago Mrs. Abbot came into the schoolroom one morning and said to the children: "I have some news for you. Your cousin Dolly is going to be married to Captain Stafford. Be good children, and don't worry your father; don't ask him any questions when you see him. Promise me that you will be good children, and do as I tell you. Your father is not well.'"

"And that was all?" Helen questioned.

"All that I can remember. The children promised not to worry their father—they are moderately obedient children, and very affectionate. When their mother asks them to do a thing, they generally do——"

"Bother the children," Lady Roydmore interrupted.

"Tell me more. Did Lou Abbot say nothing to you—offer no explanation to you?"

Jane shook her head.

"It would have been extraordinary if she had 'offered any explanation' to me. I had never spoken about Captain Stafford to her. She may not even know that I know him. He has never been talked about at Plym Tor since I have been there till he was engaged to Dolly."

Helen stamped with impatience.

"Engaged to Dolly! How can you bear to speak

the words? How can you bear to think of it? 'Engaged to Dolly!' It's revolting!"

"And to-morrow he will be married to her," Jane said in a very low, unsteady voice.

"Dolly found out that you knew him? I am sure of that. She found out your weakness as she found out mine, as she has found out Harry Stafford's—and traded on it."

"*My* weakness?" Jane questioned.

"Yes; your love for him, for you *did* love him, Jane. So did I; confess it as I do. Dear, don't let us grudge him the love we have given him, don't let us be ashamed of it. The memory of it may help to give him a little comfort—I won't say *pleasure*—in the time to come, for he will have little besides 'memory' to comfort him, I fear. I shall never feel pain at any one's downfall, not even my own, after this. Other people will *pity* him. Fancy any one in the world daring to feel 'pity' for Harry Stafford."

"You're taking it for granted that he is not fond of her. Yet if he isn't, why should he marry her?"

"Don't ask 'why' in a case like this, and don't expect me to be reasonable; and above all don't take up the long-suffering tone of hoping for the best, Jane. Say out what you think about it—to me, at least."

"Ah, that I won't even say to myself. If I said what I thought, I should never like to look Dolly's husband in the face again, poor fellow."

CHAPTER ~~XXXVI~~ XIV.

"OWNING UP."

THE wedding was a sorry sight. Even Dolly—though it consolidated her triumph—saw that it was the sorriest spectacle of the kind that she had never seen or

read of. Her uncle and aunt had given her a handsome and liberal outfit, but they had steadily refused to allow her to wear anything but her sombre traveling-dress at the ceremony. There were no bride's-maids, there were no guests, no wedding breakfast, no string of white-horsed carriages, no pealing of marriage bells. The bridegroom had acquiesced heartily and gratefully in the suggestion of the bride's people that everything should be conducted in the simplest, quietest, least ostentatious way. Miss Abbot first fawned and then fought for her wedding being made the occasion of a festive function. But neither fawning nor fighting availed her. Dr. Abbot, for the first time in his life, wrapped himself up in an atmosphere of chilling reserve, and even his more emotional wife declined to either sympathise or argue with Dolly, when the latter tearfully declared that it "was a shame, and of a piece with the way she had been treated all along," that she should be shorn of the glory of a show wedding.

Her opportunities of trying to goad Captain Stafford into fighting this battle for her had been singularly few, and her efforts singularly unsuccessful. After paying his betrothed a few miserable duty visits, he had got leave and gone up to town, from whence he only returned on the eve of the wedding. Even then he restrained all lover-like ardour, and made no attempt to see his bride until he met her in the church on the following day.

"It was more like a funeral than a wedding," the butt-woman, who was the sole spectator of the ceremony, with the exception of the bride's uncle and aunt, told her friends afterwards. "Mrs. Abbot cried the whole time; the doctor looked black; and the bridegroom looked fitter to step into his coffin than to be the husband of pretty Miss Dolly. As for pretty Miss Dolly herself, she held her head higher than ever, and had a colour like a wax-doll."

There was a cold leave-taking at the lych-gate presently, and then Captain and Mrs. Stafford stepped

into the carriage which had brought the bridegroom out, and were driven back to Plymouth. It was not a cheerful drive, for the influences of a depressingly damp day were upon Dolly by this time; and finding that her newly-made husband was engrossed in deep and apparently dark thought she relapsed into silence herself, and, lying back in her corner, began to build an airy castle of pleasure, founded on what hearsay had told her of the doings of the pretty young wives of other military men who happened to be well off.

Suddenly it occurred to her that she had not seen any labels put upon her luggage, and she broke the silence suddenly by sitting up and asking,—

“Where are we going, Harry?”

“I told you the other day that I had taken a house in Stoke for six months. I hope you will like it. I tried to consult your uncle about it, but he——”

He paused abruptly, with a burning recollection of Dr. Abbot's reply, which had been to the effect that the future arrangements of Captain Stafford and his wife were matters of profound indifference to him.

“But I mean where are we going first—for our honeymoon?”

“To the house I spoke of in Stoke.”

“Good gracious, how dull! Why won't you take me somewhere nice, Harry? I thought, of course, you'd take me to London. And why didn't you consult me instead of consulting my sulky old bear of an uncle?”

He disregarded the first part of her speech, and dealt only with the second in his answer.

“Look here, Dolly, I want the truth from you. What has made your uncle change from the genial, jolly fellow he was to the rather insolent bear he has become—to me, at least? I acceded to his demands when he rather authoritatively ordered that you and I should become engaged, but he has never been the same to me since. He treats me—well, confound him, as I have never been treated by any man before.”

He turned his head and looked intently into her eyes which shifted uneasily under his gaze, and then he added quietly, "You know the reason, and are probably at the bottom of it. You may as well tell me what it is, for I shall find out."

Dolly stripped her left hand glove off impatiently, and looked for moral support at her wedding-ring and the half-hoop of large diamonds which guarded it. The sight of these gave her confidence. She was the "wife" of the man who was suspicious of her integrity, and his "wife" she would remain, to be externally honoured by him and the world, remain unless she was ever silly enough to do something rash and forfeit the position. Fortified by this reflection, and being perfectly indifferent to what he thought of her now, she said, with calm defiance,—

"If you want to know the reason of uncle's airs, I will tell you; but I think you had better not want to know."

"I shall ask him; he will at least give me a straightforward answer."

She laughed.

"Before he gave it he might say something you didn't like, so I'll spare your feelings. Well, the fact is, when they fell upon me and bullied me for having been 'indiscreet enough' to go for long walks and drives into the country with you, and for getting myself 'talked about,' I told them that both you and I had been 'much more indiscreet than they supposed,' and then uncle swore that you should marry me, and called you names."

"You falsely accused yourself of loss of virtue, and me of loss of honour?"

"If you like to put it in that way—yes."

"Good God!"

He flung himself back in the carriage, and covered his face with his hands in a vain endeavour to shut out the awful vista that stretched before him, along which he would have to go with this woman beside him as his wife. She looked at him for a few seconds

half with curiosity, half with contempt ; then she said,—

“What *does* it matter? No one else will ever know that I said it, and we can easily drop uncle and aunt. I never want to see them again.”

But he did not answer her, nor did he speak again until the carriage stopped at the entrance to the furnished house which he had taken to be his first married home.

The repulsion he had felt for her previously was as nothing compared to that which consumed him now, when he heard from her own lips how he had been entrapped, tricked, deceived and defrauded by her. Looking at her young, fair face, her well-opened innocent blue eyes, and the almost childish lines of her supple little figure, he felt his whole soul rise in revolt against the whited sepulchre which concealed such a foully scheming soul. That she was false, vain, heartless and intensely selfish he had discerned with fatal perspicuity from the day he had become engaged to her ; but that she had been base enough to falsely accuse herself of a fall which she had not had, astounded as much as it disgusted him.

It was all up with any hope of happiness arising out of this luckless, loveless, lamentable marriage. The most he could do for her and himself was to vow that he would always treat her in a way that might hoodwink all who knew him into supposing that he honoured her. But simultaneously with this vow he breathed a prayer, which was that no child of hers might ever call him father.

“The first thing you will do to-morrow will be to write to your uncle and make it clear to him that you accused me and yourself falsely,” was the first command he laid upon his newly-made wife, and Dolly rebelled against it.

“I don’t feel like doing it a bit ; what does it matter what he thinks now? We’re married, and there’s an end of it.”

“It matters this much to me, that I don’t choose

that Dr. Abbot shall think me a blackguard any longer. You can explain your lie away in any way you like, only let him know that it was a lie."

"*You* may tell him if you like."

"Don't you understand that would not be the same thing?"

"I think you are making a fuss about nothing," she retorted contemptuously. "We need never see anything more of the Abbots; it won't do us any good to keep in with them, and it won't do us any harm if they don't think very highly of us. I don't see why you need care."

"Have you no gratitude, to say nothing of natural affection?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Don't worry me about them any more. I would rather write the letter half-a-dozen times than hear so much about it."

"Then I trust to you to write it to-morrow," he said.

Dolly's first disappointment in her married life was, as has been told, being "defrauded," as she considered it, of her honeymoon trip. Her second was that her husband had taken a house outside, like any "commonplace civilian," instead of getting married quarters. Dolly had indulged in visions of becoming the idolised queen of a military *salon*, and of making every man who frequented it, from the colonel down to the youngest subaltern, dangerously in love with her. The women would then be proportionately jealous of her, and her cup of bliss would be full. She had also intended to generously show herself a good deal in the barrack square and on the tennis-ground in ever-varying, beautifully-built frocks and costumes. But these visions were rudely dispelled by the reality. The ladies of the regiment called upon her, it is true, but they did it with a want of spontaneity and a lack of enthusiasm that told its own cruelly lucid tale of her being a little off colour. Captain Stafford had, in fact, done himself and his wife an evil social turn by

perpetrating his matrimonial mistake in the quiet, secretive manner in which he had made it. Men would have obliterated the dimming shadow of apparent secrecy from their minds readily enough, but gentlewomen would insist upon asking, "*Qui Bono?*" at every opportunity; and there was no reason to give, or rather no reason was given.

Captain and Mrs. Stafford returned all the calls that were paid to them with punctilious promptitude. It was a period to be lived through, and Harry Stafford lived through it as fast as he could. He saw and felt tiny shades in manner and thorns in speech that passed unnoticed before Dolly's supercilious eyes, and fell unheeded on her indifferent ears. If he had been blessed with one grain of love for her, it would have increased and multiplied during this period, for Dolly was, from the artistic point of view, a perfect study. Secure in the possession of a husband who was coveted by every girl who knew him, of dresses that were coveted by every woman who saw them, of unfaded youth, of a face and form that were easily arranged into beauty, and of a temperament that never allowed its owner to be flurried, hurried, disconcerted or put into a round hole when a square one suited her better, Dolly "fetched" so much admiring attention from the majority of men that it was incomprehensible to her that her husband should remain in the minority.

He felt sorry for himself that he should be unable to be as other men in this respect. If he could only have blotted out the memory of her multifarious deceptions from his mind, and started afresh, taking her as she seemed to be, and was, at this time, he would have been an infinitely happier man. But he could not bury his unsavoury dead. He was perpetually remembering that just "so and so" had Dolly looked and spoken when she had been leading him on to make himself the idiot he was now ready to proclaim himself.

The remembrance of the falsehood she had told her

uncle stood between him and any tender thoughts of her. He saw trickery in all her words and deeds, and fancied that she was as transparent a fraud to others as he had himself discovered her to be. Altogether, the outlook at the commencement of life with his wild flower was as discouraging as his worst enemy could have wished it to be.

CHAPTER XXXVII .

ONLY A MAN.

BOTH Lady Roydmore and Jane were under the spell which draws women irresistibly within the radius wherein sights and sounds that are odious to them are rife. Each knew that the sight of Captain Stafford, either happy or miserable, in his new and honourable estate of matrimony would be grievous to them. Yet this knowledge did not prevent either of them from doing all in their respective powers to work their way back to Plymouth, with an appearance of ease, and in the natural sequence of things.

Forgetful of the disinclination she had once felt for Jane's companionship and continual presence, and regardless of all the excellent reasons she had once assigned for not asking for it, Helen now exerted all her powers of persuasion, pleading and argument to induce her step-daughter to stay with her altogether, instead of going back to the flat drudgery of a governess' life. But Jane preferred the flat drudgery to the possibility of being at some future time merely a tolerated fixture in Lady Roydmore's establishment.

"I should have to ask you for things just as if I were ten years old ; and the day would come when it would bore you to have to supply all my little wants. I shall stay where I am until the little Abbots don't want me any longer, or until it occurs to Florence to let me have some of my own money——"

"Or until you marry?"

"I am not likely to do that now. I don't meet men of my own class, and I am not in love with any one out of my class, so, you see, I am spared all temptation of that kind."

"Dr. Abbot's new partner has not caught your heart on the rebound?"

"My heart has never rebounded. Wherever it has gone—if it has gone anywhere, which I haven't admitted, you know—there it will stay."

Helen's pretty eyes glistened with tears for a moment or two as she said,—

"I wish I could make your life a happier one. A fortnight ago I thought I was going to play the part of fairy godmother, and get you what I felt was the dearest and best thing on earth to you. Now I can do nothing but wish you to blot out the very memory of that thing. It was never worthy of you——"

"Let us go out and climb about on the cliffs," Jane interrupted, "and don't let us talk about the worth or the worthiness of anything or any one. We are all of us mistaken about every one else, I think. You don't think very highly of Florence, I know, but your old friends the Wyndhams, who are, you say, saints upon earth, think her a creature too pure and good for human nature's daily food. We were all very angry when you were going to marry papa, but your marrying him made him very happy, poor man; and your kindness to me makes me feel ashamed of ever having been angry with you. Yet you are the same 'you' now as then; so it must be that my judgment was wrong then, or is wrong now. It's the same about everything. There's always a reverse to the shield, if we could only see it."

"Nothing will ever make me think better of Dolly than I do now. When a man like Harry Stafford throws himself away, one is bound to hate the woman on whom he is wasted."

"But is he wasted upon her?" Jane asked, half-laughingly, half-seriously. "We are angry with Dolly because we think he is too good for her. But *is* he too

good for her? Perhaps there are some men who are raging against him, and saying that 'Dolly is wasted.' After all, I suppose a grown-up man knows what he likes best; and he must have liked Dolly best, or he wouldn't have chosen her."

"That sounds generous and impartial; but if you thought that he really liked her best, you wouldn't say it. Jane, you want some new dresses. I shall think that you are going to pose as a martyr to the cause of your sister; if you don't let me give you some pretty frocks. You're getting to stoop a little, too, and you are wearing gloves that are a size too large for you, and your hair is done in the fashion of last year. While you do these things, I shall not believe that you are anything but a disappointed girl. You may be young and pretty still if you like, but you are letting yourself lapse into old girlism and dowdyism. We are all pretty much alike. If we haven't the incentive of trying to win a man's admiration before us, we pretend to think Jenny Wren's is the better part. Then, after a time the part is found to be a sombrely monotonous one, and we long to be re-cast for another. And then it's too late. Don't give up all desire for brightness while you still have it in your power to be brilliant. You have it in you to be so very happy. It seems dreadful to me that you should resign yourself to being merely 'contented' all your life."

Jane's colour rose and her eyes sparkled. She clasped her hands together, and stretched them down in front of her as Lady Roydmore spoke. Every drop of the warm, holiday blood in her tingled and leapt under the influence of Helen's words. How little Helen knew, how little any one ever would know, of the wealth of hot feeling, of passionate desire for excitement, luxury, beauty and pleasure which Jane had been fighting against and keeping down for years! Her own generous impulses, and the supreme selfishness of others—more especially of Florence—had always forced her to take a hindmost

place. She had not liked the ugly dresses and the comfortless rooms in the old days at Bath; but Florence had decreed that these things should be her portion; and rather than let the rest of the family know how thoroughly she had found Florence out, she (Jane) endured them passively, but not patiently. She had not liked sacrificing herself and her money to the greedy needs of her unscrupulous sister later on. But no one else thought Florence worthy of a single effort being made on her behalf, and Jane was determined not to endorse the general judgment. All her relations, and the majority of her friends and acquaintances, had prophesied evil things concerning her experiment of going out as a governess, and so she had fought against her own dislike of the position in order that these prophecies might not be fulfilled. She had been, and still was, in unconscious revolt against all the overwhelming influences of her life; at the same time, she would not oppose herself to them. She allowed herself to be overwhelmed, and was mutely, but hotly, indignant with every one who attempted to act as either obstructionist or helper.

Just now, though she refused to be guided by Lady Roydmore's counsel and wishes, she was strongly inclined to succumb to their influence, to give up warring against her own tastes and impulses and take such ease and pleasure as might fall to her portion in a home with Helen. But the reflection that by so doing she would forfeit the independence that gave her the right to continue to offer up sacrifices to Florence deterred her, and caused her to stubbornly determine to continue along the dreary and dull path she had chosen to tread.

But her determination was upset from a very unexpected quarter. During her absence, Mr. Barker had made a confidante of, and won the sympathies of, his senior partner's wife. Mrs. Abbot was one of those excellent women who are never happier than when paddling about in the turbulent waters of that treach-

erous sea on which young love is perpetually embarking. Having got over the few mild qualms she had once experienced on her own account while Dr. Abbot had been weighing love in the balance against prudence, and her daughters being still too young to cause her any fitful anxiety, she was always ready to listen to a recital of any one's amorous dreams. The alternately, hopeful and dismal visions of Mr. Barker had a special interest for her founded on a solid and wholesome basis. She knew that popular feeling is in favour of a married doctor, and as Mr. Barker's interests were now identical with those of her husband's, she made up her mind to help forward the young Irish doctor's with all the forces of her heart, head and hand.

Accordingly, she wrote to Miss Herries, telling her that, as a woman and a mother, a wife, friend, Christian, and several other admirable things, she could not reconcile it to her conscience to being accessory to the torture which Jane's presence would inflict upon Mr Barker unless she (Jane) would listen favourably to his suit, and look upon him as her future husband. Then, by way of adding strength to the arguments she had already advanced, she wrote :—

“I have always considered you such a sensible girl, that I will not allow myself to believe a suggestion which Dolly Stafford is very fond of throwing out, namely, that her husband once led you on to think he cared for you, and that you are bitterly disappointed in consequence of his having married Dolly. My dear child, if such is the case, bring pride to your aid, and cast him out from your heart and memory, and do not give my spiteful little niece the ill-natured triumph of seeing that she has been able to blight a much better girl than herself.”

Jane's answer to this was brief and definite :—

“As you won't have me back unless I get engaged

to Mr. Barker, and I should never think of engaging myself to a man who got a woman to propose for him, will you kindly send the luggage I have left behind me to the railway station? Lady Roydmore and I are going back to Plymouth for a little time, so Mrs. Stafford will have an opportunity of triumphing over my disappointment and dejected appearance. I hope I shall see her husband, as I shall always like him better than any one I have ever met."

When Mrs. Abbot read this letter, she was not angry, but she was very much hurt. She realised now that it was too late, that she had done the cause of her friend Mr. Barker more harm than good by the endeavour she had made to mould it after the fashion he desired. In fact, the insertion of her matronly finger had ruined his pie, and this thought gave her much disquiet.

But her distress on this point was as cowslip unto oxlip as compared with the sore vexation she felt at the bold and open way in which Miss Herries proclaimed her liking and preference for a man who not only had not chosen her, but had chosen some one else. Mrs. Abbot's thoughts and feelings had always run in safe, narrow and blameless grooves. According to the tenets of the creed which she had learned in her youth, and by whose articles she had rigidly guided herself during the whole of her non-adventurous pilgrimage, it was a woman's part to love her love with an "a" because he asked her, and never to admit the existence of any stronger sentiment than the mildest friendly feeling for any man who had not manifested a readiness to get the licence and the little bar of gold. It savoured of audacious disregard of discretion and what she called "true feminine dignity" that a girl should tell the truth, and avow that she intensely liked a man who had not asked her to do so, or offered to give her the legal right to recognise his attractive qualities. It savoured of immorality, she felt, with a shudder, when, as in this case, the man mis-

guidedly appreciated was married to another woman.

The trials and temptations of this wicked world were chiefly known to Mrs. Abbot through the mediumship of books, or from sketchy hearsay. She had quite a touchingly undefiled faith in the old legendary dangers that beset weak womanhood from vile man on every side, and this in spite of her never having consciously come in contact with a gay deceiver in the whole course of her career. Appalling pitfalls must be dug, she felt, for the feet of a girl who could so far forget maiden modesty as to write of another woman's husband in the terms Jane had used about Captain Stafford; and, reprehensively as Dolly had behaved, her aunt thought there was something even more iniquitous in what she regarded as Jane's cold-blooded determination to court danger by risking a meeting with him. What precise form the danger was to take Mrs. Abbot did not attempt to define. She would have recoiled with horror from the idea of a climax that would have seemed possible to a more worldly-wise woman. The vapoury perils that lurked in the grateful glances and warm hand-pressures a man gives to a woman whom he knows regards him well and warmly, were terrible enough for her to evolve and contemplate. With all her heart she pitied Jane for what the consequences might be, as much as she blamed her for the indiscreet frankness with which she proclaimed the feeling that might bring those consequences about. It was only natural, being what she was, that she should turn and babble of these feelings and fears to one so ready to share them as Mr. Barker. The result of their many conferences was that the subject took form and substance rapidly, for Barker mentioned what Mrs. Abbot said and thought and feared to two or three of his own trusted and intimate friends who in turn, mentioned it to others. Accordingly, before Miss Herries had been in Plymouth a week, or had ever seen Captain Stafford, it was good-naturedly observed that it "was a pity their names should be coupled together," and that, "really, being

a newly-married man, Captain Stafford ought to be thoroughly ashamed of himself."

In ignorance of these little odorous breaths of scandal, Jane acquiesced, with an eagerness that was born partly of pain, and partly of pleasure, when Lady Roydmore proposed that they should, for Harry's sake and by way of showing him how exaltedly superior they were to all petty feeling and jealousy, call upon his wife. No rumour had reached these birds of passage as to the stand-off attitude and looks askance to which Dolly had been treated. But Dolly fully credited them with having heard of her non-success socially, and with their call of courtesy being made in the hope of being able to gloat over her disappointment.

Her house was very pretty, and her dress very perfect, and she herself was glowing with the excitement of baffling what she believed to be their ill-natured curiosity, and also with gratified vanity. For it may be told that if Captain Stafford was indifferent or blind to his wife's charms, other men were not so, and Dolly had quite a dashing little following of those who found the meretricious, sparkling little married woman, who never bothered them by the display of deep feeling, much safer and more attractive than the prettier girls with whose "people" the day of reckoning would have to come if they indulged in gay fooling.

Under the influence of these various feelings, Dolly was glowing when she came in. She greeted her visitors with the assured self-possession that was one of her characteristics, drawing a sharp hard line between the cordial equality she displayed towards Lady Roydmore, and the air of tolerant, affable superiority to which she treated Jane.

"I expect my husband in every moment. He will be glad to see you, I am sure, Lady Roydmore. He has often spoken about you, and always so warmly."

"Your husband and I are friends of several years' standing," Helen said coldly. Then she added, "I

hope we shall see him ; I want to wish him happiness."

Dolly shrugged her shoulders.

"He will be as happy as most people are who, having got everything they want, fancy they would like something else better," she said scornfully.

"How is my aunt, Miss Herries? What has made her amiable enough to release you from the drudgery of teaching my dreadfully tiresome cousins to-day?"

"She has released me altogether."

"Then I suppose the report I have heard is true, and you are going to be married?" Dolly interrupted, as Captain Stafford opened the door and came into their midst before he saw who his wife's visitors were.

In the little confusion that arose, Jane had no opportunity of rebutting the charge which Dolly had so deftly made against her. The attempt to offer any explanation would have been ponderous and ill-timed. Moreover, she forgot herself in the absorbing interest of this moment of meeting with him again. He looked harassed and seemed constrained, but for all that he was still *the* man among men in her eyes. It was evident that their presence in his house gave him no pleasure, and he expressed no desire for the continuance of any kind of intercourse with them. In fact, these two women who had loved him very wildly, and still loved him very weakly, would have felt rather chagrined had they been able to fathom his thoughts, which ran something in this wise,—

"I've made a confounded ass of myself ; but as I am married, why the devil won't they let me alone to make the best of it?"

At the same time, an opposition sentiment stirred him. The vainer and more carnal part of him was glad that their interest in him was so undiminished, that it had conquered their essentially human repugnance to seeing him in these dismally altered circumstances of his life.

After all, he was only a man !

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ROCKS AHEAD.

FOR three years the Honourable Jane Herries had led the exciting, but not exhilarating, life of a shuttlecock between those battledores, inclination and circumstances. Her sister Florence had obeyed the dictum of always considering most highly the greatest good of the greatest number to the letter. But, then, Florence believed the greatest number to be number one. She had considered herself so exclusively, in fact, that she had omitted to remember Jane at all. Consequently, Jane found herself regarded as a selfish, greedy and unjust oppressor whenever she ventured to suggest that, at least, she might have a modest share in the goods with which she had enriched Mrs. Graves.

“It’s such a short-sighted policy,” the latter argued, when dire necessity compelled Jane to approach the obnoxious subject. “If you deprive me of any of the poor little means I have of making myself alluring and attractive, how *can* you expect me to settle well in life? And if I don’t settle well, it will serve you quite right if I am a burden upon my friends for the rest of my days. The Wyndhams are nearly all that I could wish them to be, but there are lots of things that I have to do and to get that I don’t wish them to know about. If you’re only reasonably patient, you shall be rewarded in time, Jane; but you destroy all the grace of your generosity towards me by reminding me of it. You’re so inconsistent. You used to say you loved your independence, and were proud of being able to give music and painting lessons,”

"I give such atrociously bad ones."

"That's your own look-out. Why don't you improve yourself, and give better ones? I am really afraid that you're very unconscientious. Indeed, I know you are, or you would not contemplate wrecking me after having rescued me from drowning once. Just as my object is nearly accomplished, too! Just as I am on the brink of doing splendidly for myself."

"You have been on the brink of doing that so often, Flo, but all the men have escaped you. I suppose it's a man you're counting on again, isn't it?"

Florence nodded her head complacently.

"Is it Mr. Wyndham? Oh, Flo, you're not going to marry that dear old man and make him miserable, are you?"

"Certainly not; that dear old man won't give me the chance. But there's a dear young man in the family who's as weak as water about women. He's been playing the fool with a married woman, and half broken the moral hearts of his uncle and aunt. But now he sees the folly of his ways. He has chucked the woman, and his uncle is going to settle a good income on him now, and leave him all the money by and by if he will marry sensibly. He *will* marry sensibly, for he will marry me!"

"Who is the married woman?" Jane asked reluctantly. She knew intuitively what the answer would be before she asked the question, and from the depths of her heart she pitied the husband of that woman with whom young Wyndham had airily played the fool.

"She's a Mrs. Stafford. It's not a bad case, you know, at least not a found-out bad case. She had got him under her thumb, because he had been in love with her before she married, and she kept him there rather cleverly in a semi-platonic way that didn't give any one the right to send her to Coventry, but that has been rather expensive for him. Of course my two old dears look upon the mildest flirtation of that sort as one of the seven deadly sins, so they've

bribed him into promising to be a good boy, and he has persuaded himself that he has broken with Mrs. Stafford for her sake more than his own. Oh! I remember! *You* went sadly for the love of a certain Captain Stafford at one time! I wonder if this is his wife? Is he married? I have forgotten."

"He is married, but this lady is not likely to be his wife."

"Is she not? I'm rather sorry for that, for perhaps she will not carry on so guardedly in future, and her husband may get a divorce; and if he was your old love, he might turn to you in his tribulation. I should really like to find out for you. Did you ever see your friend's wife? I can show you a photograph of Mr. Wyndham's Mrs. Stafford; he sent it up to his aunt to show her what an angelic creature his Dolly was."

"Dolly!"

"That's her name; and I see by your horrified expression that she is your Captain Stafford's wife."

"Poor fellow!"

The words were commonplace enough, but they came from a heart that was being wrung to torture by a paroxysm of pity for the man who had cast her aside for this woman who had now dishonoured him.

"I don't know that I think him very much to be pitied," Mrs. Graves said carelessly. "He's a handsomer fellow than Wyndham, and a more fascinating fellow; but I suppose he didn't think it necessary to exercise any of his fascinations on his wife. Young Wyndham is very staunch to her. He declares she is 'as guileless as an infant,' and I pretend to believe him. When he marries me, he will find me very sensibly ready to be on very friendly terms with his Dolly!"

"What a revolting resolution, unless you do believe him!" Jane said hotly. "But you don't mean it, do you? You only say it to disgust me?"

"What is there disgusting in my admitting that I am prepared to be very acquiescent? Do you think,

even if I loved Paul Wyndham—which I don't—that I should be idiotic enough ever to show jealousy of him? When once a woman does that, she loses all power over a man to whom she is legally bound. If she isn't married to him, she may venture to do a little of the pouting and reproachful business if he doesn't happen to be tired of her, for he has the fear of losing her before his eyes. But his wife must stay and bear anything and everything, unless he knocks her down and elopes with some one else. Now, I never mean to goad him into doing either one or the other. So I shall see only what he wishes me to see, and be very friendly with Mrs. Stafford."

"Don't you think that it's just possible he may not care to marry you even on such easy terms as you propose?"

"That possibility wouldn't occur to you if you knew even a very little of his character. He *likes* nearly every woman he meets, and *loves* a great many. Mrs. Stafford, he imagines, has been the love of his life, and the one woman in the world for him, because she has always impressed upon him that her husband is an Othello, who will round upon both Wyndham and herself unexpectedly some fine day. This has given the zest it wouldn't have had otherwise for Master Paul, therefore he has what he calls 'stuck to her,' on account of the elements of danger, impropriety and opposition. But there is something he likes even better than braving these elements, and that is an easy time. It's not feasible to have a thoroughly good and easy time without money; so, in order to get money, he will yield to his uncle's prejudices, profess to relinquish his pursuit of Mrs. Stafford, and offer me his hand, name and fortune. I shall be very well contented to accept these without being exacting about that portion of his sensuously imaginative nature which he calls his 'heart.'"

"Where are the Staffords?" Jane asked abruptly.

"Here, in London. They have a pretty little

house in Lower Belgrave Street. He has left the service, you know ; or don't you know anything about his career? They are notoriously unhappy, so if you meet him you may play the part of consoler without compunction. He let out to Lady Roydmore that he was tricked and harried into marrying his Dolly, and that he loved you best all the time."

"Don't say any more about that."

"Why not? It's always gratifying to a woman to hear that a man has loved her best, in spite of his having married some one else."

"It's a dangerous gratification ; at least it might be dangerous if I saw him again. It might make me show that I was sorry for him, and then he would think me a fool for my pains."

"Well, I think you're a fool because your emotions are genuine. If I were in your case, I should pretend to feel a lot of things about such an interesting man as Captain Stafford. But the display of my sympathies would never injure me, however warmly he reciprocated. Unfortunately for yourself, you have a way of saying what you mean, and meaning what you say. So, as you are a prude at heart, perhaps it will be just as well if you never see Captain Stafford again."

"Am I a prude at heart?" Jane said meditatively ; and even as she spoke, she was thinking how much better it would be for her and for him, if, now that she knew he had loved her best, they never met again.

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Mrs. Graves' instinctive insight into young Mr. Wyndham's character was proved soon to be singularly correct. He loved luxury infinitely more than he did the smiles of Mrs. Stafford. That lady had hardly received his written assurance that he "loved her so dear that he only could leave her" before the rumour of his engagement to the lovely young widow, Mrs. Graves, was wafted abroad. Dolly, though a little nettled at the desertion of a man who had been

slavishly devoted to her whenever he was in her presence, was far too prudently conscious of what was due to herself to betray any of the chagrin she felt, even to her renegade lover. Her letter in reply to his was couched in terms of the friendliest warmth, and not a single sting lurked in one of her neatly-turned sentences. It was difficult to refrain from dealing him a sharp stab while she was smarting under the blow which his infirmity of purpose had dealt to her. But she did refrain from writing a single word which savoured either of retaliation or vindictiveness. She expressed a hope that the friendly relations which had existed between them would be sanctioned and shared by his wife, and wished him a larger share of happiness in his married lot than had fallen to the share of her "unappreciated, neglected self." He was so touched by the sweet resignation she displayed in her renunciation of him, that he testified afresh to the guilelessness of her nature and character to his uncle and aunt, and finally persuaded them to make amends for the wrong they had done her, in deeming her a "married flirt," by calling upon and making innocent-hearted efforts to cultivate her acquaintance, and gain a further knowledge of her true worth.

Florence smilingly encouraged these efforts, and gave her future husband to understand that if a fresh intimacy was cemented between his quondam enslaver and himself, that intimacy, encouraged as it was by his uncle and Aunt Dorothy, would be warmly sanctioned and approved of by generous Florence herself.

"I can rise superior to all petty jealousy, Paul," she said, when he half-apologetically ventured to express a hope that she "would like Mrs. Stafford," in whom he emphatically assured her there was no harm ; none in the world.

"I can rise superior to all petty jealousy, and perfectly understand the existence of a very strong friendship between a man and a woman without meanly

suspecting them of anything wrong. Indeed, I have such a friendship with a man myself."

Paul Wyndham smiled faintly, and not by any means approvingly, when she told him this. Pure as he professed to consider his compact with Dolly Stafford to be, he had not the slightest intention of permitting a similar one to be entered into by his wife and any man. However, it would be time enough to put his foot down and settle that subject when he could do so with marital authority. There was no harm in his worshipping the ground on which Dolly stood, and thinking that his rights were infringed if she bestowed any of the time and attentions he coveted upon her husband. But he was determined that there should not be even the appearance of harm in his wife's conduct with any "old friend" of her own. In fact, he could not emulate Florence's expressed magnanimity, for a demon of exceedingly mean jealousy was ready to enter in and take possession of his soul on the very smallest provocation. Accordingly, when she confessed to having such a friendship with a man herself, he only smiled faintly, and registered a silent vow to nip that friendship, whether he should find it to be in full bloom, or only in the bud.

Meantime, the preparations for the marriage went on with brilliant rapidity, and the old uncle and aunt vied with each other in their lavish munificence to the bride-elect. As Dolly Stafford had neither any delicacy of feeling nor scruples of conscience to combat, she made herself intensely useful and accommodating to the sensible young woman, who was so superior to the petty meanness of jealousy, at this juncture. And in consequence of this diplomatic amiability of hers, a social intercourse was established, in which Jane Herries became eventually involved, and against her instincts, judgment and deep sense of honour, she met Captain Stafford as a friend again.

It was patent to her very soon that he was a miserable man. Miserable in his marriage, miserable in the sickening knowledge he had that his wife despised

him for the fatuous way in which he had allowed himself to be deceived and entrapped by her ; above all, miserable in the profound conviction he had, that never a gleam of real love-light would ever brighten his lonely, discontented, disappointed existence. Badly as he thought of Dolly, despicable as he knew her to be, he had been true to her, to honour and himself, as if she had been a real helpmeet and noble wife to him. But now suddenly he was confronted with a fresh trial and an awful danger, for once more he was thrown, through no fault or design of his own, in contact familiarly, with a woman he had loved passionately, who was well worthy of that passionate love, and who had suffered him to discover that she had returned it.

CHAPTER ~~XXXIX.~~ XVII.

A SMALL BEGINNING.

“ COMING out as a peacemaker, a healing medium between husband and wife, are you, Jane?”

Florence was the speaker ; Florence, looking charming in a blue and fawn-colour tea-gown, with some rare old lace drawn from one of Miss Wyndham’s apparently inexhaustible stores billowing round her pretty throat and down the front of the dress ; Florence, exultant in the prospect of making a brilliant marriage on the following day with a man to whom she was so profoundly indifferent, that the idea of his “amusing himself” with another woman was a relief to her.

“ I am playing the part unconsciously, for I don’t know any husbands and wives who are at strife just now. Perhaps you will give me some work in that line before long,” she added, with a laugh.

She was feeling lighter-hearted than she had felt for years, and she was refraining from calling herself to account for this exaltation of spirit. Perhaps it was

owing to the fact that Florence's marriage would lift the burden of hard work from her shoulders which had been laid upon them for years ; for successful Florence had promised to give Jane back her own again, now that the Wyndhams were going to supply her (Florence) with all that she imagined her heart could ever desire.

"Oh, but you are playing the part very prettily and successfully. If you'll sit down and take off that hideous dust-cloak, I'll reveal you to yourself. Jane, why will you persist in wearing clothes that don't become you?"

"If I answered that question truthfully, you would say I was 'ungenerous.' Don't look at my cloak ; reveal me to myself without delay."

"Listen, then. Mrs. Stafford was here yesterday, lauding you to the skies. She says since Captain Stafford and she have renewed their acquaintance with you, life has worn a different aspect for them both. He is ever so much kinder to her, and better tempered at home ; consequently, she is happier, and so studies to please him more. And it's all owing to you, she says."

"Owing to me? Ridiculous ! I have seen Captain Stafford two or three times, and exchanged perhaps a dozen sentences with him."

"But you have impressed him with a sense of your being rather a good and noble sort of person, Mrs. Stafford says, so he wants you to be a friend to her."

"That's an invention of Dolly's to further some private end of her own. Captain Stafford is the last person in the world to utter such mawkish, sentimental twaddle. He knows his wife never liked me ; he knows I never liked his wife. He would never be so feeble as to express a wish to bring us together."

"She has improved very much since her marriage, Paul Wyndham says ; become much more intellectual and refined."

"Does he attribute the improvement to his influence, or her husband's ?"

“He does Captain Stafford the justice to say that he’s one of those fine, gallant fellows who would shame a woman out of being sly and mean.”

“Mr. Wyndham thinks she *was* sly and mean, does he? Well, I think she *is* so still. What can her motive be for wishing to set up an apparent intimacy with me? What is yours for trying to further her wish?”

“I never dive into other people’s motives, and I never analyse my own,” Florence said carelessly.

“Now, let me show you your dress. It’s a dream—much prettier than the one you wore at my first wedding. You’ll look a dream in it, too; for you also are much prettier than you were at my first wedding. Won’t you return the compliment by saying the same of me?”

“I think that, if possible, you are vainer now than you were then,” Jane replied; but she said it so affectionately that there was no hidden sting in the words.

Then Florence unfolded some of the glorious apparel which was to be worn by both of them on the following day; and presently old Miss Wyndham came in with some more wedding presents which had just arrived; and, in the pleasurable excitement of inspecting these things, Jane forgot Captain Stafford and his wife for a time.

As soon as Florence became Mrs. Wyndham, junior, she, with a flourish of moral trumpets, generously relinquished Jane’s income into the latter’s own hands again. Jane, in turn, relinquished her pupils, and blossomed out into renewed youth and good looks under the beautifying influences of immunity from anxiety, becoming dresses, and the knowledge that she had it in her power now to live where she liked and as she liked, without let or hindrance from either friends or relations.

Now that their eldest sister had done so uncommonly well for herself, the Roydmores were ready

to forgive and forget all her peccadilloes in the past. At the same time, they roused themselves to feel and express sentiments of profound approbation for the spirit of generous sacrifice which Jane had shown for her sister's sake. The desire to intermeddle with her management of her own manner of life was repressed at once by Jane when young Lady Roydmore hinted at the advisability of her husband's unmarried sister taking up her abode with some Herries relations in Scotland, of good position and limited means, who had shown a disposition to remind Roydmore that the head of the house of Herries might reasonably be expected to aid the lesser members of it. The remuneration which Jane could offer them for the privilege of living in their bracing northern atmosphere and healthily unexciting family circle, would rank as a benefit conferred on them by Roydmore himself, and put a stop to reminders of consanguinity, and applications for his interest in the various quarters in which the persevering sons of the family desired to push their way. These reminders and applications were particularly distasteful to young Lady Roydmore. Her husband was never troubled with any similar ones from her side of the house. Therefore, it behoved him to save her from further disturbance in this matter by using his authority over his sister, and consigning her to the care of these impecunious members of the clan.

However, Jane having been permitted to enjoy the sweets of liberty during her period of poverty, resolved to discover how they tasted, now that she was comparatively affluent. She set Roydmore's authority aside easily, with the remark that she would not burden him with the weight there would be on his conscience if she threw in her lot with one of these brawny, young, impecunious cousins in a moment of madness, and then came to an untimely end through being overwhelmed by dullness and duty. The discussion as to her future arrangements was briefly concluded by her declaring,—

“I shall live, as I have been living for the last three years, without a chaperone. The only difference will be that I shall have pretty rooms in a nice position, instead of ugly rooms in an unpleasant one, and that I shall spend my time with friends who like me, instead of with people who look upon me as distinctly inferior to themselves, though they pay me for teaching them—or for trying to teach them—something they don't know. Very likely I shall marry some day——”

“Never, if you live in such an unconventional Bohemian way,” Lady Roydmore interrupted.

“Oh, don't despair,” Jane laughed.

“Then it will be beneath you.”

“Indeed, you need not fear that. I think as much of intellect, morality, honour, courage, and character as you do. Whoever possesses these qualities is my equal, and I shall never marry a man who does not possess them.”

There was a ring of sadness in the tone in which she concluded her sentence. Captain Stafford was the only man she knew who possessed all the attributes and fulfilled all the requirements of which she spoke. And Captain Stafford was tied up and bound down to Dolly. Oh, the pity of it!

She very soon settled down into the groove which she had indicated to her brother and sister-in-law as being the one she intended to move in. The furnishing and decoration of the pretty rooms, in a nice situation which she had selected, gave her full occupation for a time, and her friends grew and multiplied exceedingly. Mrs. Stafford strove hard to become one of these friends. But, though she sought Miss Herries with flattering zeal and perseverance, the latter refused to fall to the flattery. She felt that, whatever motive actuated Dolly in seeking her, and being seemingly unconscious of the lack of responsiveness in Jane's manner, it was not either affection for or interest in Jane herself. What it was remained to be proved or seen.

"May I bring my husband to see you?" Dolly asked, one day. "I have been describing your lovely, little rooms to him, and you know how artistic he is. He wants to see them."

"Certainly, I shall be very happy," Miss Herries said reluctantly. The mere thought of him, much more the sight and sound of him, was sufficient to detach Jane's interest from everything and every other person. She grew restless—idly restless and distraught—even when she suffered her thoughts to dwell on him too frequently. There was no salt, no savour in the society of others when the memory of him intervened between her and them. She felt prophetically that the pretty rooms, in the adornment of which she had taken such pleasure, would never be the same to her without him if once he came. He would admire and praise and touch things; and afterwards there would be more pain than pleasure to her in regarding them when he was not by to admire and praise and touch them with her. Better to do without the one brilliant gleam of sunshine which his presence would be to her, than to have it to contrast with the drear fogginess which his absence would create. The knowledge that it would be thus with her, if once she saw him in her very own home, made her utter the conventional words,—“Certainly, I shall be very happy,” so reluctantly, that sharply-perceptive Dolly divined at once what it was that caused the hesitation.

“She is in love with him still; how dare she be? She shall smart for her silliness.”

To let Miss Herries and Captain Stafford see sufficient of each other to tempt them to wish to see more; to put them off their guard by the appearance, on her own part, of being entirely unsuspecting of the existence of any deep feeling between; to lure one or other, or perhaps both of them, to the display of some emotion or interest which they had no right to entertain,—this was the plan vaguely forming itself in Dolly's mind for the punishment of the two people who asked nothing more now than they might keep apart.

The possibility of leading them on to say or do something which would put either of them in a false position, and give them the appearance of wronging her, was as water in a dry land to Dolly. She could conceive nothing more *piquant*, in the way of small revenge and retaliation, than to be able to taunt her husband for a folly that would be a twin to the one he had accused her of committing. She could bring forth no more pleasing picture than that of standing as an injured wife, hedged about with all the majesty of her rights, over Jane, and crushing the latter to the earth. To be able to say words to her husband about Jane Herries which would make him writhe with wrath and shame, and which he would not be able to disprove, would give that zest to Dolly's life which had been lacking in it since Paul Wyndham had let himself be bought off her. Beyond the desire to compromise and humiliate Miss Herries and Harry, Dolly's ambition did not vault at present ; but she was quite ready to turn every unexpected incident, and the force of any character she could control, against them, if she saw her way to benefiting herself thereby.

The Staffords had fallen into the way of seeing even less of each other than they had done in the early days of their married misery. He spent nearly all his time at his club, for nothing bored Dolly more than to feel that she was liable to him at any hour of the day. Theatres bored her too, unless some other man than her husband escorted her. Accordingly he had ceased to ask her to accompany him to what was his favourite form of amusement. He hated dining at home, unless he had some friends dining with him, who were distractingly entertaining enough to make him forget his wife's presence for the time. And Dolly hated his coming home to dinner, unless he brought some man with him who would pour his soul out to her in flattery and presents.

Under these circumstances, spending so much of their lives apart, though one roof covered them, it was a difficult matter to bring her husband and Miss

Herries into collision without raising the suspicion of motive in his mind. However, she contrived to do it without any active agency on her part being apparent.

A feverish cold, terminating in a sharp attack of neuralgia in her face, served as an excuse for writing a note to Jane, asking her to "come to afternoon tea, and charitably cheer up a woman who did not deserve so much charity at her hands, but who would plead sharp pain, and sad, sad dulness as her excuse for the liberty." To accede to the request was a very small thing to do, Jane thought. After all, the woman in sharp pain and sad dulness was Harry Stafford's "wife." And to aid his "dog" even Miss Herries would have put herself to personal inconvenience. So, providing herself with the fairest flowers that she could afford, and the liveliest book she could find in Mudie's list, she went at her sick and suffering rival's perfidious call.

Dolly's drawing-room had the look that even a beautifully furnished room gets which is inhabited and thoroughly permeated by a woman who loves to acquire every pretty and expensive thing she sees, but who has not the fine art of assimilating these when she becomes possessed of them. The incongruities were numerous, but not artistic; and Dolly, pretty and fashionably attired as she was, failed to harmonise them. On the present occasion, she was neither pretty nor fashionably attired. Her face was puffed with pain, and she wore her tea-gown with a dolorous disregard of the adjustment of its lines to her figure. She felt a little ashamed of herself for having got her guest with intent to damage the latter, eventually, when that guest came in with the new book and fresh flowers, and the words,—

"We like each other better than I thought we did, Dolly, or you wouldn't have sent for me now, and I shouldn't have come."

As she spoke she put the flowers lightly down, without any fussy arrangement of them, where Dolly

could see and smell them. Then she took off her gloves, and put her slim, cool hands on Dolly's aching head and face. In a sudden gush of good, regretful feeling, Dolly was *nearly* saying,—

“I won't engross your time this afternoon, as my husband has promised to come and sit with me,” but the moment for saying it passed before Dolly could speak the words. So Jane sat soothing Dolly's pain with tender touches; and Captain Stafford coming in presently, expecting to be greeted with reproaches by Dolly because he had not come in before, found Jane thus employed, and felt annoyance at the spectacle.

CHAPTER ~~XL~~ XVIII.

“'T WAS A NET.”

ANNOYANCE at the spectacle was the first sensation Harry Stafford experienced. He had killed the feeling of acute dislike to his wife which had been engendered in him when she revealed herself fully to him in the early days of their marriage. But in place of this there existed nothing warmer than a cold, negative indifference, which could readily be fanned into aversion again. Dolly would have been a disappointment to him in many ways, even if she had not been unprincipled enough to have foisted herself on him for life by a fraud. Beneath the soft, fair skin and the innocently-childish, starry eyes there were no hidden depths of either tenderness, devotion, sympathy or intelligence. Dolly was essentially a summer-hour woman. She liked people precisely in proportion to their power and willingness to conduce to her comfort, pleasure and well-being, to the exclusion of every consideration for every other human being than herself. She also liked ruling, directing, obtaining the mastery over and trampling upon those about her by unfair means in preference to fair ones. She was

eminently untruthful both in word and deed, invariably taking the tortuous lying path, even when the straight veracious one was open to her. She was shallow, selfish and vain. She had neither the wish nor the power of entering into her husband's higher aspirations, or sympathising with his efforts to achieve them. She was not even proud of the way he had distinguished himself in the service, and sneered at the way in which he was now struggling to make his mark as a journalist—a struggle which was nearly crowned with success in these days, when his path again crossed that of Miss Herries. In a word, Dolly was a thing made up of fair flesh, false feelings, fine clothes and frailty; and her husband knew her for what she was, and felt for her accordingly.

It jarred upon all that was best in his nature to see even the appearance of intimacy between such a woman as he knew his wife to be and one whom he loved and respected as he did Jane Herries. He made no attempt to delude or humbug himself by shallow sophistries, such as the pretence that the love had died out—killed by a sense of honour and duty. The love was there—strong, deep, passionate, as it had been that night in the conservatory when he had told her of it, claimed hers in return, and kissed her. It had gone astray and wandered after other women since that day; been befogged and lost for a time. But it had *lived* through everything, and it beat in his heart, through every fibre of his being, through every sensation of his soul, strong, deep and passionate as ever, now that he met her again.

He was a man to whom half measures were intolerable. Half a loaf never theoretically appealed to him as being better than no bread. Across such a barrier as his wife, it was hideous to him to have to contemplate Jane. Reason would have told him that, as it was Jane's bright, sympathetic intellect and soul he chiefly adored, he might have enjoyed these things to the full on the neutral ground of friendship. But he did not ask reason anything about it, and would

not have listened had reason volunteered the information. He was "no hero, but a man;" and he knew, though it would be entrancing to live under the influence of her intellect and soul, that this would only be the half loaf which never sufficed to him after all. Her sweet, winning, enthralling bodily presence, the face that had a look for him which no other man had won from it, the form that had throbbed in his arms for one wild minute, and held itself sacred to him since, it was these, the essentially human part of her, that made intercourse across the hateful barrier intolerable to him.

Savage, restless, disquieted with Dolly for subjecting him to this further unnecessary trial, he seemed to Jane to be a morose and gloomy man that day. His manner to his wife was distantly polite. To Miss Herries herself it was painfully distant, at least it was so until, as she was bidding him good-bye, his eyes met hers for one unlucky moment, and then it became bitterly suggestive.

Mrs. Stafford caught the look as it sped, and though she hated her husband, it resuscitated her apparently dead malignity. "He still preferred this Miss Herries to herself," the woman who so infinitely preferred Paul Wyndham to him felt angrily. Well, his footsteps should become entangled, and he should be in danger of falling, too, if she could bring such an end about. Then, perhaps, when this end was compassed, he would be sorry he had scorned and been harsh to her for her little fleeting fancy for and folly about Paul Wyndham.

"Dear Paul, you and I will be revenged upon them all, and have the laugh against them all yet," Mrs. Stafford thought, as her husband, at her request, went out with Miss Herries to see her safely home. Dolly, settling herself among her cushions, with the amusing novel in her hand and Jane's flowers filling the air about her with their fragrance, was quite happy, quite satisfied with the turn things were taking. That her husband would come in presently

more morose and gloomy than he had gone out she anticipated ; but she did not mind. She rather liked to be able to complain of him with the shadow of a cause to Paul Wyndham, whom she had trained to regard Stafford as a brute. She rather liked to see the chains she had forged herself about him galling the husband who had never even feigned to love her. She more than rather liked the prospect of seeing Jane—the sister of the woman who had dared to marry Paul Wyndham—tumble into a pit of her (Dolly's) digging. She longed to see that “honour,” of which Harry Stafford was so justly proud, which he had never sullied yet, dragged in the mud by his own hand. She felt, in fact, happy as a little scorpion, who sees before it the probability of stinging several people during one brief fling ; and, as many hours passed before her husband returned, she enjoyed her happiness undisturbedly.

She dined at her usual hour, hugging the conviction to her heart that Harry “was staying with that odious girl—complaining of me probably, and pleading for her friendly sympathy.” “*I* know what friendly sympathy comes to when people have been in love with each other,” she thought, as she worked through the courses of her delicate little dinner. It had never been the custom of this unhappy couple to spend any time together alone which they could possibly avoid. Captain Stafford's work on the press, and as the compiler and editor of a valuable quarterly military record, obliged him to spend much of his time at his club, or at chambers which he had established for the sake of writing in peace, without let or hindrance from the partner of his domestic joys and expenses, and this arrangement had always been agreeable to Dolly. She had her own small gossiping *coterie*, and, until lately, she had Paul Wyndham whenever she choose to order him up. There were no jealous qualms assailing her about Harry. He might go where he liked, flirt with and love the million if he liked, disgrace himself by so doing if he

liked. Dolly had been quite indifferent as to what he did hitherto. But this night she was not indifferent. She hoped that even now he might be flirting with Jane Herries, and that his evil inclinations might lead him on to love her and disgrace them both. It would be such a stunning blow to the Herries' pride! Such a splendid Nemesis to overtake the unscrupulous gambler who had got his relations to buy Paul Wyndham away from her (Dolly).

It was very late that night before Captain Stafford came home. So late that the lights were out in Dolly's chamber, and the fair occupant was sleeping as soundly as if she had not just been planning and hoping for the ruin of fellow-creatures who had never done her anything but good. His conscience was very clear as he turned to his own room, though the early dawn was stealing over the world. He had seen Miss Herries safely to the door of her home, and taken leave of her with as much emotion as a morally-disposed fish might have displayed. He had then, feeling unequal to Dolly, dined at his club; and afterwards he had gone to his chambers, and written for many hours lucidly, and even brilliantly, on a subject about which he had been feeling a dejected inability to write powerfully for some time. It was a military subject, which demanded erudition, experience and subtle tact in order to deal with it properly, and he had been specially requested to treat it by a leading journal. It was a subject about which Jane Herries knew positively nothing, yet it was a few words from her which had spurred him on to his success this night. He had been telling her of the stagnation of his ideas, of his sudden, inexplicable difficulty in arousing them, marshalling them into order, and making them subservient to his intense desire to be lucid and strong enough to stir the official mind and instruct the British public. When he had finished, Jane had merely said,—

“ You will do it. You're born to command everything, including your own ideas and manner of ex-

pressing them," but she looked at him as she said them, and he read in her eyes the intensity and fervour of her sincerity and utter belief in him.

"Thank you!" he said, and then—well—then they parted, in body at least, with a very quiet clasp of the hands; and so, nought but good came of that first meeting.

Nought but outward good at least. But possibly there may be a doubt felt as to whether the blankness, the chill sense of desolation, the hungry desire to see him again, the dread of having to go through many weary days, perhaps even weeks, before she realised this desire, which succeeded her first exaltation after parting with him, was altogether good for Jane.

It was awful to her, to feel the fact of his being married made no manner of difference to the way in which she regarded him, both with her eyes and heart. Every change of expression which had fled across his handsome, careworn face this afternoon had stamped itself in lines of fire vividly on her mind. How she longed to know what had drawn those lines! how even more she longed to have the privilege, the right, above all, the opportunity, of trying to eradicate them! A hundred times that night she breathed the words,—“I could die to make him happy.” A hundred times the fatuousness of the proposal struck her, and she admitted that what she really wanted was, that she might be permitted to live to make him happy! Oh! why had Dolly been born to lower such a crest, to mar such a life as his? Why, as Dolly was to be the arbiter of his destinies, was she (Jane) unfortunate enough to have been entangled in them ever so slightly?

Naturally none of these questions received any satisfactory answer, for they were replied to by the questioner herself.

“I should have revolted from myself in horror once if I had thought I could ever feel this for another woman’s husband. I revolt in horror from myself now, but I *love him* all the same,” the spirit of truth

within her said repeatedly. But she strove to quench the spirit of truth, and when she got up in the morning, chilled, weak and depressed, she said to herself that "it was only friendship she felt for him—warm friendship, nothing more!"

There was more safety in the soul-felt admission of the night than in the cooler calculation of the morning. The one had been wrung from her by a potent sway which she could not resist, the other was the offspring of expediency. Under the guise of friendship she might be with him, listen to him, sympathise with him, urge him on, interest herself and show her interest in him frequently without fear or reproach. So friendship was the better part, and in friendship it was fated they should soon meet again.

Meantime, young Mrs. Wyndham, who was nothing if not versatile, was giving all those most nearly connected with her an anxious time. She had wearied of the Wyndhams and the Wyndhams' ways. She had conceived a supreme contempt, especially for that member of the Wyndham family who had sold himself into matrimonial bondage to her, in order that his debts might be paid, and his idolatry about Mrs. Stafford condoned. Florence was sick to death of Redhill and its sumptuously respectable routine. She had with renewed funds resumed friendly relations with the Penarths, and the happy nights she spent in town with them, losing everything she could lay her hands upon, made the Redhill life flavourless and eventually nauseating to her. "Poor Geof's" habits of yielding to her in everything, and letting her squander his money, stood out in strong and favourable relief against what she considered the dastardly way in which young Wyndham dared to inquire into and attempt to limit her expenditure. He wanted the money with which he was freely endowed by his uncle, to conduce to his own pleasures, in truth, while Florence felt that as, but for her, he would not have been so endowed, he had less right to it than she had. Accordingly, they quarrelled and taunted one another,

and, as the husband held the power of the purse, it soon came about that Florence had to come pleading to Jane for sums of money which were essential to "carry her over" some desperate crisis. With her pleadings she always mingled promises of speedy repayment. But these promises were never kept, and Jane, in consequence of her sister's flattering reliance on her, was often in sore straits to meet the just demands made upon herself.

"I must make money for myself. I can draw. I wonder if Captain Stafford will help me to sell my drawings?" Jane thought.

So runs the world away!—the wicked, entrapping world!

CHAPTER ~~XII~~. XIX.

THE BARRIER RECEDES.

HAS it ever been the hap of any one who reads these pages to have come to the point at which the roads leading respectively to good and to evil diverge? Has it, further, been that one's lot to stand there unadvised, unfriended, and, to all appearance, entirely irresponsible to every one for what may occur whichever path one may elect to take? To stand there with the feeling that no one cares, that no one heeds, and that no one has the slightest right to institute inquiry.

Some such feeling as this was upon the Honourable Jane Herries on a blustering March morning, some few months after that meeting with Captain Stafford, which has been recently described. She had seen him several times during the interim, and had arrived at a full understanding of his domestic position without his having explained it to her in so many words. Nor, to do him justice had he even attempted to indicate it to her. But his misery had escaped from him inadvertently, and manifested

itself clearly and forcibly to the one who would rather have seen any other spectacle in the world than this special manifestation. She understood him, in fact, and showed that she did so with that fatal facility which is a snare to men and a curse to women. He had fallen into the habit of telling her about many of the unimportant, and some of the important, items which made up the sum of his daily life ; and she had fallen into the habit of first expecting, then longing for, and finally almost demanding to hear them. Before she knew what she was about or wanted, she had arrived at the pass of feeling herself wronged if she even so much as suspected that he was keeping anything back from her. This exacting mood of hers was all in the way of that friendship which they each professed, and each tried to feel for the other. At least she tried to feel it and nothing more for him, or thought that she did so. As for him, it is impossible to say what a man either does feel or tries to feel when he sees that a woman, for whom he has a strong passion, is absorbingly in love with him.

Jane had become regularly established as an artist on the staff of a well-known publishing firm, which encourages art as liberally as it does literature, to aid in the supply of the unceasing stream of those charmingly illustrated children's and other story books for which there is such an incessant demand. Her work occupied much of her time necessarily, and she laboured at it indefatigably. But it must be confessed that the strongest motive which influenced her in doing this was the hope that he would see it, be pleased with it, and be proud to feel that he it was who had urged her to cultivate her talent and turn it to account. She felt almost as if he had created the power in her ; and this feeling, coupled with the fact that he had actually and practically introduced her to her employers, added gratitude to the list of dangerous emotions which possessed her with regard to him.

Moreover, the exigencies of her profession frequently brought her into contact with him without design.

The Military Record, of which he was proprietor, editor and compiler, was published by the firm for which she drew. This circumstance always threw a halo over her visits to the publishing office ; for, if he was not there when she went in, there was always the possibility that he might come at any moment ; and, when he did appear—"Was it joy? or was it woe? or was it both together?" as the old song asks, that she felt.

After a time the possibility became a probability, for she fell into the habit of taking her drawings regularly on a certain day of the week, and this day he found was the most convenient for him to go to the office and look over the slips and proofs of those service communications which he received from all quarters of the globe. There was no understanding between them to do this. It was a coincidence for which neither of them was accountable. A coincidence, indeed, of which neither of them had any consciousness for a time, as they did not happen to meet for some weeks. Though they were at the publishing house at the same time, they were in different offices ; and though each had an instinct that the other was there, they did not meet.

But there had come a day when they had taken their departures simultaneously, walked away together, and, after this—well the day on which she carried her drawings to the office became the day of the week on which she lived. The other days she worked and thought of him, repented of her thoughts, dreamed of him when she slept, and woke to feel penitent and remorseful, and to think of him again.

This special March morning she had taken her drawings as usual to the artistic editor of the house, and had received payment that was sweet, and praises that were sweeter, for them. But she was taking her way home with a sense of disappointment, for Captain Stafford had not been there, or, if he was there he had made no effort to see her. On fine days recently it had been his custom to walk with her

through Piccadilly and the Park, nearly as far as her home in Kensington ; and these walks had grown to be sweet as stolen kisses to poor Jane. There could be no harm, she argued, in walking in these public places with the man who was her friend, and who "was happier with her," he told her, than with any one else. No "harm," and so much throbbing joy in it, though prolonged pedestrian performances did not commend themselves to her on ordinary occasions.

This day a stinging sense of being neglected, perhaps forgotten by him, set in after the first disappointment had passed over. She was trying to reason with herself, trying to feel that she was not only wrong, but a fool, for supposing that he would go on for ever, or even for long, giving up so much of his time and attention to a woman who was nothing to him, "absolutely nothing." She muttered the last two words half aloud, as people are apt to do under the influence of painful excitement, when desirous of convincing or assuring themselves of something. As the echo of her words died away on her ears, some one stepped quickly up to her side, and the voice that had the sweetest music in the world in its tone for her said,——

"I am so sorry I was late. I just missed you. Let me walk all the way home with you to make up for it."

Her eyes shone with joy. The delight of seeing him after all, of finding that he was not neglecting, not forgetting her, the prospect of having him all to herself for the next hour at least, threw her so off her guard that she let her tongue speak what her heart felt for once.

"I thought I shouldn't see you to-day, and I was miserable. What made you late, Harry?"

In her agitation she was unconscious that she had called him by his first name. She had never done so before ; but he was determined she should never go back from doing so now.

"One of my wife's confounded caprices made me

late. She has taken it into her head that the London smuts are settling on her lungs, and insists on having a cottage on the river, near Maidenhead. She pretends to think that it would be possible for me to do my journalistic work there, and so kicked up a sham row this morning when I told her that, as she had taken it without consulting me, she must go down by herself. She doesn't want me there, I know that. But what enrages me is her confounded duplicity. Why couldn't she have said she wanted to go without me? I'd have let her go fast enough."

Jane's heart had been thumping vehemently during this speech—thumping so, that she was afraid he would hear it. She could not help being horribly glad that the woman who did not love him, and whom he did not love, had gone away for a time. "It would allow him to do his work better," she told herself mendaciously. Aloud she said,—

"I quite see that you couldn't do such work as yours so far away from town. Of course, you must be up to date. But won't you find it dull alone? Won't you miss her?"

He laughed.

"I shall miss her so much, that I dare not let myself think of the day she will come back! As for being dull, you'll be kind, and let me come and see you sometimes, won't you?"

Her lips trembled out an assent.

"Begin being kind now. Take me home and give me some luncheon, and show me your drawings."

They had come to Rotten Row, and were leaning over the rails, looking at the riders. As he spoke, a man passing them at a slow pace checked his horse suddenly, and cried out,—

"Couldn't believe my eyes that it was you, Stafford, with my wife's sister. Hallo, Jane, what are you about? You wouldn't lunch with Flo to-day, so she told me, because you were so hard at work, or had to go to 'an office,' or something. I never heard it called 'hard work' to stroll about and talk to

Stafford before by any woman ! And is the Park your office ? ”

Paul Wyndham was the speaker, of course.

Paul Wyndham, faultlessly dressed, faultlessly mounted, looking blithe, *debonnair*, and as unconscious of all things unpleasant as if he were not well aware that his name had been coupled rather seriously with the worthless little wife of the man he had been partly addressing.

“ I had done my work at the office, and was going home to do more, when I met Captain Stafford by accident, and he very kindly walked on with me,” Jane said, feebly attempting that most fatal of all things—an explanation—to a person who is disposed to chaff one.

“ Ah, well, I won’t make a third and spoil sport ! By the way, Stafford, I shall take the liberty of calling on Mrs. Stafford with a couple of stalls for the Lyceum to-night. I hope she may be able to use them ? ”

“ Mrs. Stafford is out of town,” Stafford said surlily.

He had not the faintest sensation of either love or jealousy for his wife, but intuition taught him that this young fellow was quite as well acquainted with Dolly’s movements as he was himself, and the attempt to throw dust in his eyes made him savage.

“ Shall I send them to you, Jane, as Mrs. Stafford can’t use them ? ” Wyndham went on, and Jane replied,—

“ If you will send Florence with them, I shall be glad to go.”

“ I never answer for or interfere with my wife ; any fellow’s a fool who does that,” Wyndham said, raising his hat with a gay laugh, and riding off.

“ It strikes me that any fellow is a fool to have a wife at all, since he invariably fails to get the one he wants. Come, have you had enough of this ? Let us get out of the Park, and I’ll put you in a hansom, and take you home. The wind has tired you, I can see, Jane.”

She started and trembled with pleasure as he spoke her name. Over and over again she had longed to hear him call her by it, though it was not a pretty one. It was her own, and his uttering it showed that he had no overwhelming aversion to it, besides imparting an interest to it which it had lacked hitherto.

She submitted to being put in a hansom, and taken home by him, without a murmur. When they sat down to luncheon in her quaint little dining-room, in which antique German and Venetian glass was piled up picturesquely on carved black oak buffets, while baskets and bowls of violets filled the room with the freshness of spring, he thought that it was the daintiest meal he had ever tasted, and that she was the sweetest hostess in the world.

CHAPTER ~~XIII~~. XX.

“DON'T SAY THAT!”

THEY sat a long time over that luncheon, eating little and saying much. The table was a round one, and they were opposite to one another, with only some low bowls full of violets, among which some palest green Liberty silk was twisted, between them. Jane had grown surprisingly artistic in all her arrangements, considering the forlorn ugliness by which she had been encompassed in her youth. Everything about her was dainty in itself, and acquired a daintier aspect when she touched it. It seemed to Harry Stafford's enamoured eyes that the damask was whiter and glossier, the silver and glass more gleamy and bright, and the violets deeper in hue and richer in perfume, than any damask, silver, glass and violets had ever been before. It was a little bit of Arcadia to him, and he let her know that it was so by asking her suddenly,—

“Do you know Mackworth Praed's ‘Utopia’?”

"I have read it," she said demurely; but she blushed and smiled, and showed in the language of his thoughts, "she knew what he was driving at."

"You must do more than read it once; you must read it with *me* and *know* it. These cutlets, for instance! I've often tasted decent cutlets before, but I know now what Praed meant when he sang,—

"The kitchens there had richer roast, the sheep wore whiter wool.'"

"That's not the verse I like best," interrupted Jane, "it deals with eating; there are sweeter things in the world than eating. *I* like the one that tells how he

" ' Had a vision yesternight
Of a lovelier land than this,
Where heaven was clothed in warmth and light,
Where earth was full of bliss.
And every tree was rich with fruits,
And every field with flowers,
And every zephyr wakened lutes
In passion-haunted bowers.' "

It was a dangerous quotation to have made, considering their own case, and she felt that she had been foolish and had given herself away, when he said eagerly,—

"The verses that tell my story as plainly as I could write it myself are the two last. Shall I say them to you?"

"Yes—no—I mean—yes," she said.

"I shall take the liberty of paraphrasing them slightly, *very* slightly, so as to make them state my case accurately. I'll only alter a pronoun or two,—

" ' It was an idle dream ! but thou
The worshipped one wert there,
With thy clear dark eyes and beaming brow,
White neck and floating hair.
And oh ! I had an honest heart,
And a house of Portland stone,
And thou wert dear, as still thou art,
And more than dear, my own !

“ ‘ Oh ! bitterness ! the morning broke
Alike for boor and bard ;
And I was *married* when I woke,
And all the rest was marred.
And toil and trouble, noise and steam,
Came back with the coming ray ;
And if I thought the dead could dream
I'd hang myself to-day.’ ”

She made an effort to speak, but the effort began and ended in a spasmodic gulp. She felt that her face was burning, and that tears which nearly scorched her were trembling in her eyes. Why had he said it ? Why had he told her so plainly ? Why had he beat aside the flimsy veil of shallow pretence of friendship only between them, behind which she had found such fancied security ? Why had he done this ? Yet she could not feel angry with him for doing it, or even sorry that he had done it, while he sat looking at her with eyes full of such unutterable love. All at once she broke the dreadful spell of conscious love-stricken silence, by rising and saying,—

“ Let us come into the drawing-room. My drawings are there, and I want you to look at them, and criticise.”

She hurried him along, thinking that the slight change of atmosphere and of scene would drive the dangerous thoughts he had put into both their heads away. And he followed her readily, well contented to be led by her, and to be with her anywhere ! anywhere !

It may as well be told at once, that the difference in the atmosphere was so imperceptible, the change of scene so slight, that their thoughts received no dispersing shock. She tingled just as much when he stood close to her, looking over her shoulder at the drawings as she held them up for his inspection, one after the other, as she had done while the round table and bowls of violets intervened between them.

Hurriedly, nervously, but ah ! so happily, she went on explaining drawing after drawing, sketch

after sketch to him, and he held them up with her to steady them, so that sometimes their hands touched, and the touch sent an electric thrill throughout Jane's system. She tried to fight against the feeling that the thrill was one of pleasure. She tried to make herself believe that she cared no more for this brief converse and contact with him than she would have done had he been an unattractive agent engaged in valuing her works.

But she did not succeed in deceiving herself, and still she stood there before her large portfolio showing him her pictures.

Presently she came upon a little group or series, which she tried awkwardly enough to push aside out of sight ; but he was too quick for her.

"Let me see them," with that tone and air of authority which is so delicious to a woman from a man she loves.

He took the little packet of water-colour drawings away from her unresisting hands, and looked them over one by one with a sharp, incisive sense of delight which he had never experienced in looking at water-colour drawings before.

The first he devoured with his eyes was an interior—a room redolent of colour and carnations, with two figures in the foreground—two badly-drawn but strikingly vigorous figures—portraits, as he looked at them more closely he discovered, of Jane and himself.

Then came a series of flower studies—violets of all kinds, chiefly Neapolitan, lilies of the valley, gardenia, yellow roses and cowslips,

These were marked "Mine." Then came another little series marked "His." They were honeysuckle, white heather, myrtle, "white" bluebell, and the little wild geranium ; and each one of these was delicately painted by the hand of an artist and love !

"You have not forgotten my flower-lesson, I see, darling !" he said, seizing the slender hands which were holding the drawings up for inspection ; and the

hands were as unresisting as the heart, as she turned her head towards him, murmuring,—

“I have never forgotten anything—anything that you have said or done to me!”

The March wind came boisterously into the room through a carelessly opened window as she spoke, and outside dead leaves that had been full of beauty, youth and hope once, were being whirled away to destruction.

“Kiss me, my sweet! kiss me, my own! My love of my life! my very soul’s being! my best self! what is there between us but a horrible sham, a shameful fraud?”

“Ah! but *that* is your wife,” she moaned. “Take your arms away, take your lips away, take your heart away from me, Harry, or I shall think I am dragging you down to hell!”

She fell on her knees at his feet as she spoke, and he stood away from her, aghast at the conquest he had made, and the misery that conquest carried in its train. He dared not call her his “own” or “darling” now. This abased woman, grovelling under the sense of her shame, the shame he had brought upon her, held him aloof from her as no other human power could have done.

She rose at length, there was no longer any strength in her to pour tears from her eyes, or plead for quarter from this enemy to whom she longed to surrender. She was sobbing, but not hysterical, when she stood upon her feet at last. She was perfect mistress of her words and meaning when she said,—

“It is all my fault, it has been mine from the beginning; but go now, and there will be no harm done to any one but ourselves. Go now! go now!”

“How easy it is for you to say that,” he said, and it was the only cruel speech he made to her in his life.

“Easy!” She caught his hands and held them to her eyes, her forehead, her lips, her heart. “Easy! is it ‘easy’ for me to hurt you——”

His arms were round her, and his lips were sealing hers before she could finish her sentence, but in a moment she had slid from his embrace and got herself apart from him.

"I wouldn't unlive a moment of it, I wouldn't have a bit of it undone," she panted out. "Feel that, understand that. No pain, no misery, no wretchedness and suffering that may come to me after this will blot out this joy—that you *love me*."

"I have been a brute."

"No, you haven't, you have been *yourself*, the only man I could ever love, the only man I have ever known worth loving, all through. Ah! dear!" she cried, coming back to him with a little imploring gesture of her small nervous hands, that was infinitely pathetic and touching. "Don't regret! don't be sorry that we have met and been what we are to each other, though we must part now——"

"Don't try to teach me philosophy, for Heaven's sake," he interrupted. "Hear me! Let me tell you what my life will be without you now. You shall listen. You know what a cursed existence I have led since that woman tricked me into marrying her. You know how I have lost faith, hope, honour, everything. You know how I have fallen—no, thank God, you don't know that, or you wouldn't have given me this dear love of yours which is raising my soul from the depths of the nethermost hell to Paradise again. You know all this, and knowing it, will you let cold prudence, worldly caution, fear of the world, step between us? Reflect before you cast me back upon that black ocean of despair, rudderless."

What Jane's answer to this might have been cannot be known, for at the moment Florence flung herself into the room with the look of distressed pleading on her face, which was its habitual "wear" when she visited her sister.

"I want you to dine and go to the theatre to-night with me, Jane?—Captain Stafford! You in town? I wish I had kept a stall to offer you, but I've given

them to a couple of the Penarth's men. I thought you were down at——"

"Down at where?" he asked, as she paused in a little confusion.

"Oh! I don't know, I am mixing you up with some one else, from whom Paul had one of his endless telegrams. What sweet drawings! Little pig that you are, never to give me any of them. What a pretty, cosy corner! Why, it's Captain Stafford and yourself standing in it, Jane! Where is it? Whose house? Give me that picture of the white heather! You won't! Oh! You greedy little thing; isn't she greedy, Captain Stafford, not to give her only sister even so much as one little paltry water-colour drawing."

"Is Paul coming to the theatre with us?" asked Jane.

"Paul! not a bit of it. Paul has got a duty fit on, and has gone down to see the uncle and aunt at Red-hill. Don't you pity me, Captain Stafford, for being a grass-widow?"

Some foolish impulse moved Jane to say,—

"Captain Stafford ought to sympathise with you, he is a grass-widower. Mrs. Stafford has gone down into the country."

"Has she really?" Florence cried, flashing out an amused smile. "How very odd! and both of us bereft ones come to you for consolation, Jane."

She laughed gaily, but not maliciously, as she spoke. Florence was never malicious unless she actually gained something by being so. In the present instance she would have gained nothing, for her object was to please and gratify Jane, as she wanted a small loan from the latter, not to annoy her. Accordingly her words, though they went home, did not sting as they would have done had she uttered them in *malice prepense*.

"I have had all the consolation I am ever likely to have from Miss Herries," Stafford said bitterly; and Jane almost whimpered as she said,—

"Don't say that! don't leave me with words like that, Harry."

CHAPTER ~~XLIII.~~ *XXI.*

“AH! SO PLEASANT.”

Down at Maidenhead, in a little cottage near to the river, Mrs. Stafford was having a very merry time. She was “roughing it,” as she termed it, with only one partially deaf and entirely stupid female servant. Roughing it apparently agreed with Harry Stafford’s inconsistent wife, for she grew, after a few days’ sojourn there, much more lively and amusing than she had ever been in her life before.

There was a spice of deception in the arrangement which made it very savoury to her. Every day Paul Wyndham came down and took her on the river, when the sun shone with anything approaching warmth, and when there was no wind. On other days not quite so fine as these, he drove her about the neighbourhood; and then she had the thrilling sensation of the possibility of meeting some one who knew her or Paul, or her husband or Paul’s wife, and of mischief being made of it.

Paul always went back to town by a train that would take him home in time for dinner. Captain Stafford never came down till the evening. Dolly did not think it of moment at all that Mr. Wyndham’s visits should be mentioned, consequently she said nothing about them. On his side, her husband was tongue-tied from making any inquiries, by the new-born knowledge he had, that he himself was not altogether without reproach, as far as being faithless in heart and thought went.

The restraint this knowledge put upon his impatience and temper made him deal more gently with Dolly in these days than he had ever done before.

He did not like her a bit better than he had ever done, but he made more allowance for certain defects in her mental and moral organisation than he had ever made before. He had always known that the only passion she possessed was vanity ; but he had not always taken into consideration that she was as incapable of feeling emotions of either gratitude or affection, as a fish or a reptile.

She was absolutely devoid of all sense of honour, too. To fail in attaining any end she had in view seemed to her a disgraceful thing ; but, honestly, she felt no disgrace in stooping to any deception or subterfuge, or uttering any lie, to attain it. In fact, she was as devoid of all sense of moral responsibility as are the beasts that perish ; and, unlike some of these beasts, she was incapable of forming any warm attachment. In fact, she had the lowest possible human nature, cased in an attractive human body ; and at last Harry Stafford admitted that he had been the one to be blamed chiefly for their union, in that he had not discerned this grim truth before he had allowed himself to be coerced into marrying her.

The feeling which prompted Dolly to encourage Paul Wyndham's visits and attentions had not a spark of warmth in it. She liked him to come, partly because many people suspected there was wrong in his doing so, and partly because he never came without bringing her something pretty or nice ! Dolly loved his presents. Her eyes would grow lustrous, her colour deepen, and her whole face light up at the sight of a new ring or brooch, or dainty casket of French chocolate. He, being blinded by his infatuation, to the wants and defects of her nature, took these for signs of love for himself, and contrasted her "delicious sensibility" with the gay, good-tempered indifference his far more beautiful wife displayed towards his presence or absence, very much to the disadvantage of Florence.

Naturally, Paul Wyndham had told Dolly of that meeting with her husband and Jane Herries in the

park which has been mentioned, and Dolly put the matter aside for future use carefully. It would be delightful to have it ready in her hand to fling in his face some day when he annoyed her or thwarted her, or when some one else annoyed or thwarted her and he happened to be by to have her vengeance wreaked on him. It would be delightful to say something so insulting of Jane Herries, that her (Dolly's) husband's blood would boil with impotent wrath, impotent because the mere fact of his championing Jane would justify Dolly in saying something still more insulting! So she packed away the incident in one of the secret chambers of her memory, and led even Wyndham to believe that she had forgotten all about it.

Her opportunity might be long in arriving, but it would come some day, she told herself in faith. Some day she would be able to taunt and gibe at and mock her husband for what she would assume to be his and Jane's frailty. It would be a rare return for the scorn of her which he had shown when first he learnt what a lying network of dishonour and disgrace she had woven in order to entrap him into marrying her.

While Dolly was boating and driving about in a little pony-carriage with Paul Wyndham, and maturing a scheme of revenge all by herself, Captain Stafford and Jane were trying to make each other believe that they had forgotten the brief madness which had seized them both while looking at her sketches of the flowers he had told her she must love.

"It would be ridiculous and insulting to her as well," he argued with himself, "to avoid seeing her after what had happened. It would be brutal, indeed; for the dear girl had confessed that his friendly companionship had become very dear to her, and as it was *his* fault that the wave of imprudence had swept over and threatened to destroy them for a minute, it certainly behoved him to see that *she* was not punished for it ever so lightly."

In according with these specious arguments—which did not seem specious to him at all, poor fellow ! but “thoroughly straightforward and manly”—he did not “avoid” her. On the contrary, he saw more of her than before, for Florence’s light-hearted affable demands for “trifling aid,” were like an avalanche in their property of rolling on and acquiring force and velocity. This necessitated the widening of her borders in the field of illustrative art on Jane’s part. There was no one to whom she could apply for fresh introductions, and good, sound, critical recommendations, save Harry Stafford. And she did apply to him with the sweet sense that it was a blissful thing to be helped by him, and that the bliss of the transaction was not confined to herself alone.

One day he showed her some lines he had just written and was about to publish.

“They will show you,” he said, “what my ideas are about the bond that can exist, and does often exist, between a man and a woman. I believe it exists between us, for instance,” he added, trying to look her steadily in the face. “We’re splendid chums and comrades, are we not, without any boshy sentimentality about it?”

“Yes, without any boshy sentimentality about it,” Jane echoed, hoping that she did not look as pale as she felt.

“Shall I read them to you, or will you like to look over them yourself?”

“I think you shall read them. I am apt to stumble over manuscript, and verses are things that must not be stumbled over.”

“I have called them ‘Brief,’” he said, and then he read the following lines, while her heart sank lower and lower with each word he spoke :—

Festooned with a thousand fancies
It is passing pretty times,
Brightened by a dozen pleasures
Born in that fair, friendly clime,
Where we met !

Ah! the lightness of our greeting,
 Sure, yet *piquant*, sunny, clear;
 All the understanding in us
 Went to show us, tho' so near,
 "Strangers yet!"

'Twas your wit that took my fancy,
 'Twas my sympathy that drew
 You towards your fellow labourer
 In the old days still so new,
 When we met!

Ah! the laughter, sound and cheery,
 Won from knowledge that no laws
 Of the frigid world could fetter,
 Union from sheer friendship's cause,
 As love's net!

But our feet ne'er stumbled in it,
 Hand in hand we trod the way.
 That was pleasant while it lasted;
 Ah, so pleasant! Bless the day
 When we met!

Life has stores of sunny pleasures,
 If we take them when we can.
 One, perhaps the best of all, is
 For a woman and a man
 To forget!

Some one had come into the room, with much soft rustling of silken garments, as he was reading, but the rustling had not been heard, and a screen had concealed her from their view. Now, before Jane could offer an opinion about the verses, which, truth to tell, gave her far more pain than pleasure, the visitor came forward, blooming, beautiful, full of health, hope and happiness, with the words,—

"Charming, indeed, Harry Stafford! I had no idea I had been entertaining a bard unaware, all these years that I have known you. Are they not charming, Jane?"

"I hardly know what they mean," Jane said bluntly; at which Helen—for of course the bloom-

ing, beautiful, very inopportune visitor was Helen—laughed and said,—

“That’s why they are so charming! They may mean anything, everything or nothing. Now explain yourselves, please. What have you both been doing all the time I have been away?”

“First tell us where you have been, and what you have been doing; travellers’ tales are more interesting than the records of the stay-at-homes.”

“The stay-at-homes seem to have made considerable progress since I left,” Helen said, laughing significantly. “I have no objection, though, to own up about myself during my absence. I went to New York to find out for myself whether a certain person whom I thought dead was really so, as I have received a threatening letter saying he had come to life. Lucky it was for me that I did so, for I bowled the imposter over at once. It was my first husband’s trusted friend who did me the honour of attempting to personate him, and draw hush money from me. It was a contemptibly easy battle to win. I felt it was breaking a butterfly on the wheel, when the wretch grovelled at my feet and, with maudlin tears, implored me not to give him up to justice for the attempted fraud. He had not calculated on my having the energy to go out and face the situation myself.”

“Tell us more! Poor Helen, why didn’t you ask me to help you? With all the pleasure in life I would have gone to New York and horsewhipped the scoundrel.”

“I did better than ask you to help me—I asked the spirits,” Helen said mysteriously. “They helped me, they advised and guided me.”

“The spirits!”

“I am a spiritualist—I forgot to tell you that,” she continued, trying to conceal under a casual manner her intense dread that they were going to laugh at her.

“Don’t begin to turn the subject into ridicule, for I am in earnest and have inquired, and you are sceptical and know nothing about it. I am guided

now in every action of my life by my guardian spirits. I consult them about everything."

There was silence for a few moments. Captain Stafford was too much of a gentleman to offer a word or look of derision, of a subject of which he knew himself to be, as Helen had said, profoundly ignorant. While, as for Jane, she was too much absorbed in the reflections which Harry Stafford's poem, of what sounded to her like renunciation, had given rise to, to be able to grasp with understanding anything that Helen was saying.

"I have had no experience, as you say, of spiritualism, but I am interested in it; every one must be interested in the occult, whether he be a believer or only an inquirer," Stafford said gravely, and Helen replied eagerly,—

"Would you like to have experience? Would you like to come to my house to-night, where a private medium, a lady, is going to sit for me, and see and hear for yourself? Will you come?"

"Gladly, and with gratitude to you for giving me the opportunity."

"You shall come too, Jane. You shall go home with me and see for yourself that I hold no communication with the medium before Harry Stafford comes. Under the influence of some of her 'controls' she is clairvoyante. She may tell you things about yourself that are pleasant or that are painful, but whatever else they are they will be *true*."

"For my part, I will promise to come with a perfectly unbiassed mind," Captain Stafford said; and then the conversation drifted into other channels, and the reunited friends spoke freely of former days. But oddly enough, neither he nor Helen said one word about his ill-starred marriage or his wife.

In pursuance of the plan she had herself proposed, for the purpose of protecting her from holding any private intercourse with the medium before his arrival, Helen took Jane back with her, and in due course the evening and the medium arrived.

She was a woman of middle height and proportions, with a delicate pathetic face, and a gentle retiring manner. Her voice was singularly soft and low, and it was evidently a physical effort to her to raise it ever so slightly. For the rest, she was dressed in one of those admirably cut black silk gowns, which fit their wearer like a sheath. Her health had been very bad for some time, she told Jane, and the truth of this statement was evidenced by the hot dry feeling of her rather small hands. Her grey eyes were lacking in lustre, but there was a good deal of colour in her face, a colour that waned and waxed perpetually, and that spoke far more of weakness than of health.

After Lady Roydmore had told her briefly that "Captain Stafford, an old friend of mine, an ignoramus about spiritualism, but neither prejudiced nor sceptical, is coming," Mrs. Keith, the medium said,—

"It is more than eight years since I have sat as a medium at all, as my husband objected to it, for some reason which he was never able to lucidly explain. My powers may be very much weaker than of old, when I never 'sat' without spirits materialising themselves and walking about the room. But at any-rate we shall have a good seance, I think, for 'Peter,' who is always with me, has promised he will speak, and, if possible, show himself."

All this was jargon to Jane Herries, who, not realising that "Peter" was a spirit, thought it only extremely odd that he should "always be with Mrs. Keith, and yet make bones about showing himself." However, her eyes were opened to this and many another mystery before that night was over.

The drawing-room in which they sat awaiting Captain Stafford's arrival was the ordinary London double room, with a *portière* where the folding-doors had once been. Flowers, and a huge cage of birds, filled a conservatory at the back of the smaller room. Three bull-dog puppies, and as many broken-haired Irish terriers, tumbled about on the hearth-rug, and filled the room with a good strong atmosphere of

doggy-life. Two or three lamps burnt brightly in different parts of the room.

"This surely can't be the chamber of horrors," Jane thought; "there are no preparations."

CHAPTER XXII.

"IS VISIONS ABOUT."

BEFORE she had time to speculate about this any longer, Jane heard the firm, soldierly step that she would have recognised amidst a thousand in the hall, and the next instant Captain Stafford came in, and after a hurried introduction to the delicate and fatigued-looking medium, the business of the evening began.

"You know nothing about spiritualism, and are perhaps both suspicious and sceptical?" Mrs. Keith said to him, in her gentle, soft tones. "I am quite willing to submit to any tests you please. You may bind me in the chair in which I shall presently seat myself; you may seal me down with your own seal; you may, if you please, place a tumbler full of water on my lap, in order that you may discover whether I move or not, even when I am bound and sealed."

"Thanks," he said briefly; "I have implicit confidence in the integrity of the proceedings, and would not think of insulting you and Lady Roydmore, and degrading myself, by acting as if I suspected a fraud."

She smiled quietly.

"There is fraud and charlatanism in everything. I should like you to have the evidence of all your senses that the manifestations which will, I hope, appear through me to-night are genuine."

"I shall believe my eyes, my ears, and you," he said, very courteously.

And then she swiftly passed through the curtains into the back room, seated herself in a large chair in

which she could lie back in a recumbent attitude, closed her eyes, and, as the curtains were drawn together by Lady Roydmore, gave vent to a gasping sigh that would have told the initiated she was already being entranced by one of her controlling spirits.

The lamps were turned down a little, but there was still sufficient light to see not only every form, but every colour distinctly. A small aperture about five feet five or six from the ground had been left in the curtains when Lady Roydmore pinned them together. The dogs had been banished from the room, as they were apt to get distraught and terrified "directly the supernatural element prevailed," their mistress explained. There was dead silence in the room for a few seconds only ; then a deep, stentorian voice, which reverberated through the room, and almost shook the rafters, shouted out from behind the curtain,—

"Good evening! Nettie's gone into a trance ; but she ain't well, and so there won't be no very good manifestations to-night."

"Who is it speaking?" Lady Roydmore cried, and the rough, resonant voice roared out,—

"Peter! The abbess will come presently, and maybe Florence Maple. She'll sing for you if she comes. Lor', she have a purty voice of her own. She wor a singer in Dublin by purfession, she were ; hadn't a happy life of it, poor thing ; a bad husband, you know. Many of 'em have."

Peter sank his voice to tones of indescribable tenderness as he said this ; and then Captain Stafford asked him a question concerning himself (Peter) which brought forth the following reply in a merry, big voice,—

"I were a costermonger in the Marybone Road, I were, before I passed over. Sold carrots, and turnips and things like they. I passed over when I was eighteen. Here comes Florence Maple."

Even as he spoke a tiny voice interrupted him with the words,—

“Good evening. I am here. I will try to sing presently, when I have got more strength from the medium.”

And immediately after, a small, pallid, shadowy face came to the opening of the curtain, and looked out at them piteously with large, brilliant eyes.

Meantime, Peter was talking, laughing and cracking jokes with two other spirit voices in a most remarkable way. The one declared himself to be the spirit of a long-deceased vicar of Putney; and his oily, unctuous accents were suggestive of a clerical school which is extinct, it is to be hoped. The other avowed himself to be the Pope, and the third joined in with a quavering cackle that seemed to endorse the statement that its owner was a very aged abbess.

This was exciting enough at first, but after a time, though Lady Roydmore was absorbingly interested in it all, a certain sense of monotony settled down upon the souls both of Captain Stafford and Jane.

“Won’t you ask Peter something about yourself?” the latter whispered to him. “I should believe it more than I do now if he told you anything about yourself, for this medium doesn’t know you.”

“Peter, can you tell me if I am married or not?” Captain Stafford asked; and the answer came promptly, with a chuckle,—

“Very much married. Oh, ye’es.”

“Is my wife here to-night?” he went on.

“No, she ain’t,” Peter responded drily and deliberately; “but it don’t matter. She’s happy enough; she don’t want you.”

“Are you sure of that?”

“*I’m* sure enough. She’s got somebody else’s husband a-giving her his cheerful company. They’ve been on the river to-day.”

“I don’t want to hear any more about the past; tell me of the present and the future,” Captain Stafford put in impatiently. “Shall I be able to break away entirely from a person I like, for that person’s good and my own?”

If you get out of hailing range you will, not else," Peter said, with decision. "You'll have to get out of reach of that person's pleading looks and pretty ways afore you do it; and I ain't sure that you'll do it even then," Peter said thoughtfully.

"Is that person a man or woman?" Harry Stafford asked boldly; and Peter answered,—

"I know, but I ain't a-goin' to say. I spare people's feelings."

His last words were drowned by a burst of song from Florence Maple, who sang in a powerful high soprano a song called "Whip poor Will." Presently Peter joined in the strain, and then the vicar of Putney and the abbess cut in, and altogether Lady Roydmore's neighbours must have thought some awful orgie was going on.

The song soon came to an end, and there were palpitations visible against the curtains, as if the singers were pulsating with the vocal exercise they had taken. They were heard fanning themselves vigorously, too, just as mere mortals might; but this, one of them presently explained, was not fanning themselves, but fanning the medium, "who was very greatly and painfully exhausted."

"Nettie must be brought out of her trance soon; have you anything more to ask before I bring her round?" Peter roared out presently, and Captain Stafford said hurriedly,—

"Am I in any personal danger at present, or in the immediate future? You needn't be afraid to answer me, the consideration of 'personal' danger does not affect me very much."

"You're in horful danger, in danger you may live through; the end's not clear to me, but it will leave its mark on you for life, if it doesn't kill you. It's danger by water. The floods are round you, I see, and you're trying to save a life you don't prize."

"Is that my own life, Peter?" Captain Stafford asked sadly, but Peter only roared out, "Good-night, see to Nettie;" and as Lady Roydmore darted forward,

and flung open the curtains, they saw nothing but the medium reclining as they had left her in the big lounge chair, and still steeped in a deep sleep.

She was roused and recovered herself soon after this, and came back into the front room looking pale and weary. She spoke animatedly, though, and inquired with interest what they had seen and heard. Her delight was unfeigned when she was told that it had been a successful *séance*.

"I know nothing that takes place from the moment I am entranced ; and sometimes it is quite painful when I come back and find people are disappointed and disbelieving, simply because they have heard and seen nothing. Have you been satisfied and convinced?" she added, turning to Captain Stafford.

"Satisfied, and almost convinced," he replied. "I asked one question about myself—not a leading question—and it was answered curiously."

"What was the question?" asked Mrs. Keith.

"I asked if I was married."

"And are you?"

"Peter told me I was 'very much married.'"

"But *are* you?" she persisted.

"I am."

"I am glad Peter didn't make a mistake," she said, smiling gently ; "he very rarely does. Did you hear much more from him about yourself?"

"He suggested a water trouble to me. Perhaps I shall find the pipes burst when I get home to-night," he said lightly.

But Mrs. Keith gave no smile in response to his ; she only continued to look at him gravely and steadily, till he said "good-night" to them all, and took his departure.

The warning note, the sad, sickening note of separation had been struck, Jane intuitively felt, in those verses which he had called "Brief," and read to her.

"It was all very well for him to do this for the best," she told herself pettishly. All very well for him to protect her from himself by parting from her,

but did he know, did he feel, did he care what this parting meant for her? He would go out into the busy world of men and women, and go on having, as he had always had, comradeship from the former, and smiles from the latter. He would have his work, too, and his work was so much more engrossing than hers. While he was writing on military grievances, he had to be very accurate as to his statistics and facts, and the necessity for this accuracy left him little or no time to brood. Besides this, he had his diversions, and men's diversions are infinitely more diverting than women's. She had her drawing, to be sure, and her coterie of lady friends. But over the drawing she had plenty of time for moods and brooding, while as for the lady friends, what woman does not know how utterly inadequate a score of women are to supply the place of *the* one man?

His resolution to carry out this deed of separation had been arrived at suddenly, and carried out with characteristic rapidity. As has been told, for a time after that lapse into the lunacy of showing their love for one another, he had decided to make no difference in his manner to Jane, but to go on in just the same old friendly grooves. But a word whispered here, and a smile smiled there, had altered his decision. He recoiled from the possibility of harming her, as he would from the brink of a precipice. He knew that if they met often, now that each knew the other's heart, they would meet once too often, and after that Jane would suffer. He knew the purity and pride which were balancing qualities in that hot, impetuous, trusting passionate nature of hers. And knowing these things, he felt that, if he would not be her destroyer, he must be her defender—against himself!

So, feeling that the danger was so imminent that in instant action only there would be any chance of safety, he withdrew himself almost entirely from the society and the scenes in which he would be likely to meet her. By doing this he dealt her a blow

which made her turn and writhe in hot resentment at "his cruelty" for a time. But, after a time, she forced herself to look at things in a clearer light, and tried to "think that she thought" there was more love in his leaving her than there would have been in his clasping her hand in his, and taking her closely along with him on the downward path.

But it was a miserable time, and, while it was passing, the spring came and went, and gave place to a summer that seemed to have been borrowed from the south, it was so full of the strength of beauty, colour, fragrance and warmth.

It found Jane still vainly trying to forget, as *he* had advised her to do in that last line of his little poem, and it found Dolly still at Maidenhead, occupying herself in much the same way as she had occupied herself four months before.

She boated more than she had done in the early spring, going out frequently quite by herself in a tiny boat, when Paul Wyndham was not able to accompany her. She found it much nicer to take her luncheon to a leafy, secluded backwater and eat it there, than to stay at home in the cottage and hear her partially deaf and wholly stupid servant warble at her work. The walls of the cottage were but of lath and plaster, and the servant had a high, whining voice, no ear, and chronic snuffles. In the deep, leafy shades of her pet backwater, there was nothing to disturb her save a lark soaring up to heaven's own gate over the cornfield on the back, and a water rat or stoat sculling about among the reeds and rushes by the side by her boat. Tourists rarely penetrated into this backwater, for the channel that led to it was difficult to navigate, and it had a legend wherein desperate depths and forests of cruel, crawling weeds were assigned to it. But Dolly took no heed of this legend. She liked the dull blackness of the pool, and was glad that no one but herself and Wyndham came to float upon it.

CHAPTER ~~XLV.~~ XXXIII.

THERE was not a particle of pleasure mingled with the surprise Jane felt when, on going home one morning, she was greeted with the information that "the gentleman was waiting for her in the drawing-room;" and, glancing at the card put into her hand simultaneously, she saw on it the name of Mr. Barker.

It annoyed her that he should have come, not because she feared any recurrence of the "sentimental folly" of which he had been guilty in Mount Edgecumbe Park, but because it bored her inexpressibly that any man should come and lay waste her time now that Harry Stafford refrained from engrossing any of it. It bored her to think that, as they would have nothing else to talk about, Mr. Barker would probably insist on raking over the ashes of the past, and commenting on the folly of which Captain Stafford had been guilty in marrying the unscrupulous Dolly.

"If he only knew how very much rather I would that he had stayed away, he wouldn't demean himself by waiting to see me," she thought, as she ran upstairs, and for a moment or two she nearly yielded to the temptation of not letting him know she had come home, and so wearing out his patience. But this was rather a mean impulse, and she would not give way to it.

She took off her hat and gloves very leisurely, and glanced towards her study door lingeringly, longing to get rid of Mr. Barker and go into it, and begin making sketches for the illustrations of a pretty fanciful story that had lately been put into her hands. He was such an uninteresting, uncalled for, altogether superfluous interruption to the steady rush of

work on which she was being borne along. It cost her an effort to pass that door and go on to the drawing-room, and the effort clouded her face ominously; there was not the slightest gleam of the light of welcome in it as she advanced to meet him.

He almost sprang towards her, with all his old graceful impulsiveness; but even at the first glance she saw how much manlier and finer he had grown in the years that had passed since they had last met. He looked wonderfully well, happy and prosperous, too, and she was not astonished when he told her presently that he had been practising in Chelsea successfully for more than two years, and that recently he had established name, fame and fortune as an aurist.

"I have always been hoping that fate, or chance, or some old friend would give me the clue to finding you again, but I dared not hope I should still find you Miss Herries," he told her; and Jane tried to nip the budding sentimentality by saying,—

"If you don't meet me again for the next fifty years, you will find me Miss Herries at the end of that time. May I ask how you found me out now?"

"I met Captain Stafford at dinner last night; he gave me your address, and was kind enough to say that he thought you would be glad to see me."

Jane's face scorched with the fire of the angry blood that rushed up to it. This was showing his indifference, his contemptuous indifference to her, with a vengeance!

"Captain Stafford was extremely kind to take so much trouble," she said, so coldly that Dr. Barker felt that he must have offended, and looked distressed.

"You are not annoyed with him for having given it to me, are you, Miss Herries?" he asked deprecatingly.

"Not annoyed, oh, no; only you must understand that I am quite a professional woman now; my time is not my own. I rarely receive callers in the morning."

"I will not detain you—intrude on you much longer."

He paused, looking so pained and hurt that Jane repented of her manner of treating him. After all, why, because Harry Stafford seemed cruel to her, should she be cruel to this good fellow, who had loved her once, and evidently liked her still? If he would only *go*, she would give him such pleasant parting words.

"I don't regard a visit from such an old friend as you are an 'intrusion,'" she said, smiling.

"And Stafford was not to blame, I assure you," he explained. "I pressed him hard to give me your address. First he said he had forgotten it, but he searched his memory for it effectually at last. Nice fellow Stafford is ; it's a thousand pities he made that unfortunate marriage."

Jane's heart hardened again. In the first place, it aggrieved her that Dr. Barker should presume to speak of Captain Stafford as a "nice" fellow ! And in the second place, any allusion to his fatal folly stung her like a bunch of nettles.

"He was the best judge of what would bring him happiness ; he was free to choose, and he chose her out of all the world."

She spoke so bitterly that he looked at her uneasily.

"Did he choose her?" he questioned. "I rather think she chose him, and tricked him into the marriage."

Jane heaved an impatient sigh.

"Did you come here to discuss Captain Stafford's marriage?" she was nearly saying, but she checked herself, and said instead,—

"I am afraid we shall not do him much good by discussing the question."

"Indeed we will not ; and I want to discuss another that is of much more importance to myself."

She looked round, praying for something to intervene, and stop what she felt sure was coming. If

only Florence would come in and borrow money, she would bless her for the timely interruption.

He saw her appealing glance at the door, and answered it in words.

“I am detaining you from an important engagement, I fear; but Miss Herries—Jane, what I have to say I must say before you send me away. Do you remember that day we spent in Mount Edgecombe Park?”

Did she remember it? Aye, only too agonisingly well! She had been foolish, blind, stupid enough to be jealous of Helen that day, little thinking that foolish, flirting, false Dolly was the rock on which both Harry Stafford and herself were to be wrecked.

“I remember it well,” she said. “The children were tiresome, and ran away from us.”

“Do you remember the words I said to you then—the boon I craved of you?”

She moved her head in slow, unwilling assent.

“I crave that boon still. I have never ceased loving you. I say those words again. I ask you to be my wife.”

He rose up and stood before her, eager, pleading, resolute, manly, waiting for her answer, and it came.

“Look at me,” she said, beginning tremulously, but getting firmer with each word she uttered. “Look at me, and see that every word I say is *true*. You have shown me your heart, and what a good, gallant, true heart it is. Now I will show you mine—and my misery!”

“Your—misery?”

“Yes, my misery, and my folly and obstinate wrong-headedness. Four years ago, when you asked me the same question you have asked me again to-day, I loved a man with all the power of loving in me, who could have married me if he liked. He married some one else, however, and I—love him just as much to-day as I did then.”

“Let me teach you to forget him.”

“Teach me to forget him! Do you hold that com-

mon, shallow creed, that one nail knocks out another? If you do, I feel less sorry for you than I did a minute ago, when I feared you might have some trouble in forgetting me. Forget him! Why I *love* him, I tell you, against reason, hope and honour! I *love* him! We never forget what we love!"

"You say you love him without hope. You feel the wretchedness of doing so, yet you condemn me to the same fate. Jane, I would not be exacting. I would be contented with your friendship, your companionship, anything you cared to give me, if you will only be my wife. Try me, trust me. Let me endeavour, at least, to draw your thoughts away from him."

She got up and took a photograph of Harry Stafford from the drawer of the table, and handed it to him, with the words,—

"That is the man I love."

"You are not likely to forget him. I give it up," Dr. Barker said, handing her back the photograph. "Heine must have had my case in view when he wrote,—

"A young man loves a maiden,
Who another youth prefers;
The other, he loves another,
And has joined his fate to hers.

"It is an old, old story,
And yet 'tis ever new;
And he to whom it answers,
It breaks his heart in two.'"

"You mustn't break your heart for me; I'm not worth it."

"Is *he* worth the heart-breaking you are going through?" Dr. Barker asked. "Worth counts for nothing, I'm afraid, in these matters. I'll relieve you of my presence now, I see you want me to go; but let me come again, let me see you, at least?"

"Will that make you one bit the happier? No, Dr. Barker, I am sure that it will not. It will only make you restless. Better far, keep away from me."

“Doesn't it make you happier to see *him* ? Does his ‘keeping away from you’ make you calmer, more contented——”

“No ; because I know he loves me too,” she interrupted ruthlessly. “Through all the thick darkness of my misery and folly, there comes this gleam of light—he loves me too.”

“If I could take that thought away with me, that you ‘love me too,’ could I bear all the rest better ? No ! not if you couldn't marry me and be with me always. It would add to my misery to know that you were miserable too. As it is, I feel that *I*, at least, haven't added to your burdens.”

“But how willing you are to do it ! You would be glad to divert my thoughts from him, and my thoughts of him are my only joy ! We're all selfish, you and I, and everybody else, but somehow I can't bear to think that your selfishness about me should hurt you. There are so many women in the world who are nicer, sweeter, cleverer, prettier than I am. Do find one of them, do forget me.”

“If I told you there were better men for the having than Stafford, how then ?”

“There are none—to my mind,” she said simply. “I think I am about him as poor Constance was about Marmion ; she ‘forfeited to be his slave, all here and all beyond the grave.’ She was a fool, of course, but I am such another fool, Dr. Barker. Now I have shown you my heart. You may pity me for it's being so black ; but you'll never covet it again ?”

“Till I die, sweet,” he said ; and then he did what she had been praying he would do for the last two hours—went away.

When he was gone, she began to be sorry that she had not been kinder to him while he was there. “It would have been so easy to have made him happy for a time, at least, by a little bit of false pretence of being fond of him,” she thought for one unworthy minute. Then she repented rapidly and entirely, as she always did repent after entertaining a mean idea,

however briefly. The kindness that would have made him happy would have been poisonous to him. It might have soothed him for a short time, but after that it would but have tortured him, unless——

She halted, horrified at her own thought, but it would not be put aside, it came again and again. It stood at her elbow and whispered itself into her ear all that day, as she sat doing her delicately-accurate little illustrations of impassioned love-scenes and platonic posturings. It came between herself and her rest at night, while she turned from one down pillow to the other, in the vain attempt to keep from thinking, and secure oblivion for a time. It made her wish that some physical pain would seize her and benumb her faculties for a time, till this dominating "thought" would pass away. But it stayed with her, haunted her, assailed her alternately, insidiously and aggressively at every turn, and it was,—

"Why shouldn't some one be happy? Why shouldn't I marry him, as he wants me, poor fellow? I shouldn't be wronging any one in the world but myself by doing it; and what *does* it matter about me?"

She had accustomed herself to the idea of doing this after a few days, and felt rather grimly disappointed when he did not reappear, charged with urgent pleadings. Not that she wanted him, but she wanted to make him happy. If he had only become blind, lame, halt and incapable on the spot, she would have gone to tend and serve him as a nurse, with a sincere sense of pleasure. She would have revelled in the power of making some real return to him for the good, thorough love he offered her. But as he was neither blind, lame, halt nor incapable, she must show her gratitude in another way, she decided, and after she came to this decision, it seemed to her rather wooden and stiff-jointed morally that he did not return to the charge, and put his fate to the touch again.

"I don't want him, but I don't think he ought to have left off wanting me so soon;" and for a while

she thought more despondently of men, and the life that men make for women, than she had done before Dr. Barker's reappearance upon the boards whereon she was playing her little part.

At last the longing for the sympathy which he had been so ready to give her, and which was withheld from other quarters now, overcame her, and she wrote, not daring to think about what might be the consequences of her action :—

“Come and see me when you have time ; we are, at least, sincere friends, and you say it gives you happiness to see me. There is so little sincerity, friendship or happiness in the world that I think we may fairly take all that comes in our way.”

It was not a very encouraging invitation ; but he accepted it gladly.

CHAPTER ~~XIV~~ XIV.

THE BARRIER REMOVED.

“MRS. STAFFORD has gone down to the river, sir ; she has taken her luncheon with her.”

The partially deaf, completely stupid young woman who waited upon Dolly in her river-side cottage was the speaker, and Captain Stafford—who for once had come down early in the day to see his wife—was the person addressed.

He did not know which were Dolly's favourite haunts on the river, but the air was flooded with warmth, and there was such soft, rich, vaporous colour over everything, that the thought of the cool refreshing water appealed to him pleasurably, and drew him irresistibly down to the river-side. He had come down intending to communicate to his wife the recently formed determination he had come to of going to India for a time. The question of the utilisa-

tion of native talent in the Indian Civil Service had a great attraction for him, the attraction of repulsion, namely. In common with the majority of men who have done much soldiering in India, he disapproved of the policy which places so much of the local government in the hands of highly educated and keenly intelligent Indian gentlemen, who must be of necessity opposed to the dominant whites in their hearts. In common also with the majority of soldiers who have seen much of the native races, he had a certain amount of antipathy to them, excepting when they occupied the position of the governed. It disgusted him that they should be flooding our universities and military and civil cramming establishments; but of this disgust was born the desire to go to India, study the working of the system on the spot, and, if possible, write down its disadvantages with sufficient power to prove that our Empire in the East can no more be maintained in its integrity by native civil government than Ireland can be entrusted with safety in the hands of the Irish.

He had come not only to tell his wife of his intention, but also to ask her if she would like to accompany him. He had no wish that she should go; in fact, to be honest, he would infinitely prefer going by himself. But she was his wife, and as such it was due to her, or rather to himself, that he should pay her the compliment of giving her the option of going with him or remaining behind. He had seen so little of Dolly lately, that he was not in that state of mental aggravation with her which had been his perpetual portion while they were living together. It is always difficult to keep up a sense of angry annoyance with a person who is absent, unless that person injudiciously bombards one with letters. Dolly abstained from this crowning act of folly, and Harry Stafford was sufficiently obliged to her for her forbearance to feel tolerantly towards her, as he sauntered along by the river on this sweet serene summer morning.

There was another cause, too, for the cessation of his extreme irritation against her. He had not seen Jane Herries for a long time, and so had got out of the habit of constantly contrasting her with Dolly, and, in consequence, finding Dolly more wanting than ever. Unlike the woman who loved him, he was not always dwelling on the thought of his love. Personal intercourse with her would have kept up the fire of his passion for her. But by breaking away from that personal intercourse, he had dispersed the subtle aroma of her influence. The thought of her face no longer came between him and every fresh object on which he looked. There were many days on which he never thought of her at all, indeed ; and it may be added there were many days on which he found much sweetness and light in the society of other women. In short, he was no hero, as poor Jane thought him, but a man ! and, true to his sex, he had a great facility for forgetting when remembering was practically useless. While Jane never began nor finished a picture without wondering if *he* would chance to see it, and speculating as to what he would think of it, the recollection of her never intervened between him and his sharply analytical, keenly incisive work. His career was of just as much value to him as if she had shared it. If he could have taken her to himself, he would doubtless have been the happier by so much. But as he could not take her to himself, he got on very comfortably without her. He loved, as the majority of men of action love, with a strict adherence to the command, to take the goods the gods give. While Jane daily re-enacted for her own benefit that scene in which he had held her to his heart and kissed her, until she had wished for no better heaven than that it should be that embrace carried on *ad infinitum*, he only remembered the incident occasionally as one that had been terminated fortunately by the “girl recovering her head like the little brick she was.”

At the same time, though he had the habit now of

doing very well without her, it would have roused him to passionate resentment if he had heard of her giving herself to any other man. The thought of her lonely, dull, and extremely fond of himself, was one that he could contemplate with comparative equanimity. But the thought of her lavishing sympathy and caresses on another man, lashed him into a jealous rage. With a perfectly free conscience, he could make himself touchingly agreeable to other women. But the idea of Jane "running" a miscellany of male friends would have been revolting to him. She was "his only, his alone," as the song says, however many other people's he might elect to be.

He thought of her once that morning as he pushed his way through a thick growth of ozers and willows towards a big clump of bulrushes. He had heard her say she wanted some to put in a picture once, and the idea seized him now to get some of these, and take them to her the next day. He would then be able to tell her of his contemplated new departure, and show her how warmly he felt for her still, by detailing all his plans and projects to her, and asking for her sympathy.

"I did the right thing in cutting that short," he thought complacently; "some fellows would have gone on hanging round her till it ended in a scene or a scandal, and we shouldn't have parted in peace."

She was obliterated from his mind a moment after by a sight that is common enough on the river, a man and woman in a little boat just close under the bulrushes. It was a sight that did not pain him in the least, nor did it cause him any surprise, for he had been prepared for it half unconsciously. Coming upon it unexpectedly, however, he called out suddenly,—

"Hallo, Dolly! just pull——"

The sentence was arrested on his lips by a shriek from Dolly as she sprang up, Paul Wyndham at the other end of the frail boat rose to his feet also, and the

next moment the boat had capsized, and they were both struggling in the water.

In a flash Stafford's hat and coat were off, and he was striking out for the place down which Dolly had gone like a stone. Wyndham, who could not swim a stroke, was hanging on to the upturned boat, shouting for help. Twice, thrice, Harry Stafford dived down through deep water to that swaying bed of cruel, crawling river weed, amidst which poor Dolly had got entangled. Exhaustion was setting in, for the fight for her with the weeds was a fierce one, and he feared the weeds were going to beat him and hold her in their strong serpentine arms against him. Finally he tore her from them, but when he came to the surface the woman he held in his arms was dead.

There was a brief account of the calamity in some of the daily papers. Captain Stafford's press influence stopped the insertion of morbid details, and even this brief account Jane did not see, nor did she hear of it through Florence Wyndham, who happened to be away with the Penarths at Monte Carlo at the time, and who was thus happily spared the shock of hearing what a narrow escape from drowning her husband had just had.

Dr. Barker had obeyed Jane's behest and gone to see her again, and when once the ice was broken, she found herself glad of his coming, and sorry for his going. He had seen the account of the drowning of Stafford's wife, and the gallant attempted rescue by her husband; but the subject was a painful one, and unless Jane broached it, he resolved not to do so. As Jane knew nothing about it, she naturally made no mention of it; and Dr. Barker took this silence on her part as a sign that all was over between Stafford and the woman who shrank from speaking of him now that he was free.

It was very pleasant the intercourse between these two people in those days. Jane's life was a revelation to the man who had always lived in middle-class, Philistine society. To see a young girl, of good birth

and great beauty, going her busy way alone among the marts of men, struck him strangely at first. If she had been a teacher of anything, struggling out, ill or well, wet or shine, to her pupils, it would have seemed quite natural, and all in the order of things to him. But that she should have appointments with all manner of men of the publishing and editorial world at their offices seemed to him a little incongruous. He longed to propose to transplant her to his own prosperous, secure home, out of which she would never have to step "of need." But, fearing to lose all by asking for too much, he possessed his soul in patience for just a little longer.

"Would you change your life for any other if you had the power of changing it?" he asked one day, and, knowing how fearlessly candid she was, he half-expected and half-feared that she would reply,—

"Yes ; to become Harry Stafford's wife," but, instead of this, she surprised him by saying,—

"I think I shall change it in a measure—that is, I shall enlarge it. I have not been studying dramatic effects for my pencil and brush alone all this time. I am ambitious of vitalising pictures—of being an active figure in them——"

"What do you mean?" he interrupted. "You are a living figure in the greatest of all drama—life."

"I mean that I am going on the stage. Probably I shall fail—the many do, you know—but, at any rate, I shall have the satisfaction of feeling that I have *tried* to make my life as full of action, intelligence, ambition and sympathy as it can be made. I have no scope where I am, no outlet for what I suppose you will consider my *unfeminine* longing to play a bigger and more prominent part in the world than I've ever played yet."

"You are an artist, whose pictures are dear to the hearts of thousands, whom they move to laughter or to tears."

"That's not enough ! *Nothing* is enough for me that doesn't come home to me personally. I hate

monotony, dulness and unhappiness, and in spite of my success in my art I am monotonous, dull and unhappy very often."

"Jane, I am probably only courting a rebuff, but I must speak again on the subject that is dearer to me than success, fame and fortune. Let me try to dispel the clouds of dulness and unhappiness which are enveloping you——"

"*Don't* speak of it," she pleaded. "I love that other man more than ever ; it hurts me that any one else should speak to me of love."

"Does he reciprocate? He is free now."

"Free?"

"Haven't you heard? Don't you know? His wife is—he has lost his wife ; ah ! how I shock you. Forgive me ! I thought you knew."

She had been standing up before her easel ; now she tumbled down into a chair, covering her face with her hands in a paroxysm of shame at the sensations which overwhelmed her. Presently his voice broke the desperate stillness.

"This is fine torture ! There are some things a man can't bear ; to see you moved like this at the mere prospect that he *may* come to you now——"

"It is the only prospect I care to look at in the world," she interrupted, and even as she spoke the door opened, and "Captain Stafford" was announced.

The barrier was removed, and he had come.

THE END.

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